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by [BialyLis](#)

Summary

"Wilbur..." he began, not really sure what he was trying to say. "Wilbur, whose child is this?"

His son flinched, but didn't even glance his way, still focused solely on the blanket-wrapped baby.

"His name's Fundy," he said finally, softly and more to himself than to anyone else.

"That's not what I asked."

Wilbur looked up, but still didn't look in his direction. Instead, he stared straight ahead, blank, unseeing eyes, and suddenly the first tears ran down his cheeks.

"Sally left us," he whimpered, not even trying to wipe his face. Or maybe he just didn't know how to do it, hands still clenched on the blue blanket.

Phil almost physically felt the last of his naive hope escape from under his fingers.

"Oh. Oh, Wilbur," he sighed, barely recognizing his own voice, not even knowing when he had opened his mouth. "What did you do?"

Or;

Wilbur did something damn stupid. Here comes the consequence.

Notes

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's @Katricia with her beta skills! :D

Hello, guys! It's me, I'm back, I'm alive and I'm starting new part of this story.

I must warn you though, updates won't be as frequent as on my last fic. Probably every two weeks :(

Unless I finish earlier, then I update earlier too, lol.

Chapter 1

Phil wasn't overprotective. Not at all.

Caring, yes. Preventive, by all means. Taught by experience that silence for more than half an hour means that one of his older sons is trying to sacrifice Tommy to Satan - maybe. But definitely not overprotective. All his actions were always fully justified and resulted in a straight line from the fact that natural disasters were generally more predictable and wreak less havoc than his children.

He was just a responsible, rational father with experience. And he was not going to stop following his painstaking instincts just because his two sons had passed the magical age of majority. They could be adults (to a minimum degree), but that didn't mean they wouldn't do stupid things or make even worse decisions. On the contrary, the older they became and the more responsibility was expected of them, the more obvious it became that they weren't yet ready to meet some of the challenges of adulthood on their own. Phil wasn't quite sure how much of it was actually his fault. He knew how much he blamed himself for - for everything, exactly - but no matter how many nights he had spent sleeplessly thinking about it, he still didn't quite know what he might have done differently.

Wilbur was the best example of this. Not that Phil was any less proud of him, never in his life, absolutely not. He just found it a bit ironic that just as Techno had calmed down a bit and allowed to help himself, his brother had concluded that it had gotten a little too nice at home and it was time to activate teenage hormones, ripening into the most chaotic of possible ways.

Of course, it could always be worse. Phil had told himself this to himself when his fourteen-year-old son began wearing only black clothes, communicating with the world only through grunts, and played killer music for both ears and gray cells. He kept saying it to himself as Wilbur smoothly went from being clingy to being outraged every time Phil tried to touch him or, God forbid, hug him. He kept repeating it when suddenly it turned out that he didn't understand anything, never understood and, apparently, is the worst parent in the world, who was born already old and has no idea how hard it is to be a teenager who's required to go to school, do his homework and also clean up his room.

He lost that faith two years later when he had to pick up his sixteen year old son from the park, very drunk, spouting gibberish and as underage as possible. According to the official version, Wilbur was staying with Techno at Dream's. According to the same version, as it turned out, Schlatt spent the night with them, and Phil had neither the heart nor the desire to be hailed as an snitch later, so when Schlatt finished helping to shove his friend into the backseat, he nodded to him to take a seat in front. Of the two bad things, Schlatt was at least relatively sober and had the sense to call him when things got out of hand, which earned him the promise of silence and the night on the couch.

Wilbur was much less graceful and even less cooperative. He puked all the way home, barely made it up the stairs, and spent the next half hour kneeling on the bathroom floor, doubled

over the toilet. Phil had a bloody desire to leave him alone, not even in the hope that suffering would teach him anything, but for sheer satisfaction. Unfortunately, the mere sight of him made his heart soft, so despite all his rage, he was sitting on the floor, stroking his son on the back, brushing his hair from his face and making sure that at least he didn't get dehydrated.

It was hard to say whether Wilbur appreciated it at all, for he rarely managed to form a fairly consistent sentence.

"You're angry," was one of the first to be actually understandable. Phil really wanted to laugh at it, very, very bitterly.

"You don't even know how much," he nodded, grimacing as the boy spewed out again what was left in his stomach. He ran his fingers through his hair, because he was angry, yes, but he wouldn't be himself if he did not feel sorry for his child.

Wilbur sniffed loudly, pale and crying and struggling to keep his head up.

"I had to check," he muttered hoarsely. Phil winced at the condition of his throat tomorrow.

"We'll talk tomorrow," he said, first because he was too tired to reproach him now, and secondly, because the boy wouldn't remember any of it anyway. It will be much more satisfying to attack him in the morning when he's sleepy and with a hangover.

Wilbur slurped his nose again, gasping for air in long gulps.

"I needed to know if..." he whimpered suddenly, hiding his face in his shoulder. "Because they always said that- And- And I had to know if that was really why. And if I'm the same."

Phil didn't understand a word of any of this. But he also had reason to believe that Wilbur himself had no idea in what order he put his words.

"You're completely drunk and grounded for the rest of your life." He stroked his son's back, keeping his hand on his neck for a moment before moving it higher, brushing his hair. "But nothing else."

Wilbur spent the night on the bathroom floor because he somehow managed to fall asleep when Phil turned for a second to pour water into his glass for him, and it was impossible to wake him up. Wrapped in three blankets, a pillow tucked crookedly under his head, and a bowl beside him, in case he didn't have time to straighten up in time, he looked so miserable that Phil for a moment almost forgot how mad he was at him. Fortunately, he had a long, sleepless night ahead of him to cultivate his anger, with Tommy to help him, curled up in a tight ball by his side, because one look at his brother was enough to make him shrink in on himself, go silent, and refuse to be left alone.

Techno came home by nine the next morning, exactly as promised, apparently having a feeling that he was in serious trouble himself and it was better not to make his situation worse. Wilbur had already tumbled down the stairs and was sitting on the couch, slurping water with a very unhappy face and, as he had described himself, a murderous headache. Phil, who had already driven Schlatt home and convinced Tommy that the garden would be

the best possible place to spend Saturday morning, somehow had no sympathy for either of them.

"Upstairs," he instructed his eldest son when he paused uncertainly in the corridor. "I'll come talk to you later."

There was no need to repeat himself: Techno dashed up the stairs as quickly as if he feared he might lose a few precious minutes of peace at any given moment. Wilbur, by contrast, sunk a little tighter, clearly disappointed at the lack of any support. He put down his glass and pulled his knees up to his chin, his fingers flicking the material of his pants, much calmer but still as wasted as last night.

Phil exhaled slowly, closing his eyes for a moment, deeply hoping that the right words would just magically appear under his eyelids.

"Do you want to say what happened first, or should I start with how unimaginably angry I am at you?" he asked finally, because the world was stubbornly refusing to go to his side, and every second increased the chance that compassion would take over him and he would forgive his child of absolutely everything on the spot. It was always harder to get angry with Wilbur, especially when he looked like a beaten puppy and seemed to expect to be hit even more at any moment.

"I just wanted to know what it's like," he muttered, in the same tearful tone that usually meant he understood his mistake and just wanted to hear that nothing big happened, everything is fixable, and he doesn't have to worry that much. Phil was used to the trick by now. Which, unfortunately, didn't mean that he was completely immune to it.

"What what's like? Getting drunk? Or vomiting half the night?"

The boy, if possible, curled up even more, hiding his head in his arms.

"The first," he muttered under his breath, so soft and indistinct you could barely understand him.

Phil raised his eyebrows, a little surprised by the honesty.

"And? What is your impression?"

In all possible scenarios, when the sad face itself didn't work, Wilbur moved on to more dramatic actions.

"Because..." he began, but then he broke off and sniffed loudly. His voice trembled and gasped in far too fast, shallow breaths, at the same time trying to get out of a million words at once and unable to put together more than two. "Because- Because it was bothering me. And I wanted to see if- Because I had to check, but- Well, because-"

Pity finally took over, and Phil put a hand on his knee, squeezing it lightly.

"Wilbur." He looked at his son meaningfully, holding up a hand to silence him. And then, lowering it down, showing him to let out the breath. "Slowly."

Wilbur nodded, obediently following the movement of his hand and trying to adjust his own breathing to it. He didn't do it until the fourth time, but at least he relaxed a bit and even moved a little closer. Phil didn't go out to meet him, but he patted his thigh before withdrawing his hand, and waited patiently for a few more seconds without trying to urge him on.

"Do you remember..." he heard at last, a little more certain and coherent. "You remember that one time you went to the bar with Bad and Skeppy and came back a little drunk?"

Phil, unfortunately, remembered. And he'd reminded himself of it a million times in the last year. Though he definitely wouldn't say he was drunk. Slightly squiffy - yes, but only because he has managed to forget his weak head and how little it takes to hold on to the wall for balance. It's been ages since he had time to go out with his friends (and since he had friends at all), he wanted to worry about absolutely nothing for once, and maybe he got a little too carried away by the fun. On the other hand, all three boys should have been in bed a long time ago when at one in the morning he tried to find a way to take off his shoes while keeping himself upright. They should have been in bed, sleeping and absolutely not wandering in the hallway so that he could pretend later that nothing happened, there were no witnesses, and no one can prove anything to him.

And yet Techno was standing at the top of the stairs, watching him alertly, wide awake, in pajamas and with one foot still frozen halfway down the stairs. So Phil was watching too, not sure what else to do. Only after a moment, when the silence grew a little too loud and the atmosphere too tense, did he put his shoe on the floor as slowly as he could and straightened, raising his hands.

"But don't tell your brothers," he just asked, not even trying to save the remnants of his honor.

Techno was silent for a moment, still staring at him with the same piercing gaze, but finally he relaxed visibly, nodded his head and retreated to his room without asking anything.

He didn't have to. Even without Phil, he was tormented by remorse even worse than a headache. And it didn't make him feel any better when Wilbur ran into the kitchen in the morning (pounding his feet by every step as if he had set himself the goal of torturing the family), he paused in the doorway, looked him up and down, and with almost comic astonishment said:

"Oh. You have a hangover."

Thank the gods, Tommy wasn't all that observant, and he was content to say that Phil wasn't feeling well, thereby allowing him to keep his dignity to a minimum.

Older boys turned out to be surprisingly understanding.

"It's fine," Techno said as Phil pulled him aside, trying to save whatever was left of his authority. "It's still just you, so..." He shrugged, then frowned, becoming more serious. "Just don't do that too often, okay?"

Phil hadn't even planned on drinking alcohol for the rest of his life, so he could make that promise with a clear conscience. Even that didn't make him feel less mean, so much so that as soon as Tommy emptied his plate and ran upstairs, Techno immediately nudged him under the table with his foot.

"Hey. Don't worry so much," he ordered, probably still holding on to the role of head of the family entrusted to him the day before. "It's okay."

"Well, I don't know," said Wilbur, grinning broadly over his bowl of cereal and firmly convinced that the whole world was one big cabaret and he was in the front row. "I've already taken a bad example from you. From tomorrow on, only hard drugs and the slope down. I'm kidding!" He squeaked immediately as Techno swung at him across the table. "I'm just kidding. I don't even know where to buy something like this."

His brother scowled at him, his hand still on the alert.

"You're friends with Schlatt. Just ask him."

Wilbur dropped his fork in indignation.

"Hey! Schlatt has been clean all year! No such innuendo, please."

Phil was never quite convinced that he was just joking. Just as he had never fully forgiven himself for that one night when he had thoughtlessly jeopardized years of painstakingly built trust. And, apparently, rightly so, because it came back at the most unexpected moment and completely uninvited.

"I remember," he admitted, his expression must have revealed the exact emotions that came with it, because Wilbur quickly shook his head.

"But that's not why! Don't make such a face, it's not because..." He waved his hands in the air, probably not quite knowing what he was trying to express. "You didn't scare me or anything. Seriously." He smiled slightly, sarcastically. "It was actually kinda funny."

Somehow Phil didn't share this impression.

"Very," he muttered under his breath, which Wilbur must not have heard, cause he continued:

"And then I was talking to Techno about it, that it was actually a bit weird because you were acting perfectly normal. I mean, normal for you. And usually... Usually drunk people weren't nice. Especially the parents. And it was better to stay away from them. And I thought maybe you were just special about it or something, but Techno said it was bullshit and that people just blame the alcohol when they do shit and are looking for excuses. And that the good people won't hurt you, no matter how drunk, because they just..." He hesitated, frowned, but finally just shrugged. "You just have to have that 'thing' in you. You must be willing to hurt someone." He looked down, suddenly much more interested in his socks, and his voice softened and faded significantly. "I wanted to know if I'm like that too. Because I've read a bit about it and... And people like me often have all sorts of... problems." He pulled tightly loose thread. "You know, of that type."

Phil, to tell the truth, didn't know. At least he very much hoped Wilbur wasn't going in the direction he had first come to mind.

"People like you?" He repeated, frowning.

Wilbur just shrugged.

"Well, you know. Foster kids?" He concluded, and Phil grimaced. It's been ages since he thought of boys as anything other than his children, and he definitely didn't want to change that for a second. "Usually we're a little more... fucked up."

"You're not-" he began, but Wilbur caught his word.

"I literally still have to go to therapy," he admonished, almost angrily. It was hard to judge if he was more annoyed by the fact that he still needed it, or if he just thought it wasn't producing enough.

Phil gave him a moment to calm down a bit, making a note in his head to come back to it again, preferably when they were both a little calmer and neither had a hangover.

"And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that," he assured for now, and Wilbur made a face as if he wanted to argue, but ultimately just nodded, slowly and without conviction.

"I know. But... But what if that's not enough?" He rested his chin on knees, his arms tightly wrapped around legs. He seemed much younger, insecure and completely lost. "It bothered me. And I had to check because I don't want to..." He took a deep breath and blinked quickly, his eyes glazing alarmingly. "I never want to hurt anyone. But I'm afraid that... that someday, accidentally..."

Phil was prepared to have this talk one day. But of all the possible occasions, he expected it the least today. He didn't have high expectations - he just wanted to scold his son for something stupid once and not get hit by all the trauma accumulated over the years in the face, so that he immediately felt like a ruthless tyrant. He believed he didn't require much, but apparently he was wrong once again.

Sometimes he wished someone had told him what it would really be like, when he was taking Wilbur under his roof years earlier. Maybe he could prepare for it a little better. On the other hand, he was terrified of the thought that he might just chicken out then.

He stared at his child in silence for a moment, before finally giving up, accepting that even if he searched all day, he would not find any magic solution and must limit himself to the usual, banal truth.

"Wilbur," he began, sitting down next to him on the couch. The boy immediately moved a little closer, as if trying to test the ground. "People sometimes hurt each other, more or less consciously. Sometimes we don't even realize it. It's impossible to dry-test all possibilities. The world doesn't work that way. There's no dress rehearsal."

Wilbur sniffed, sadly and with some passive acceptance of the injustice experienced. Phil carefully brushed his hair back from his forehead, trying to comfort him a little, and before he knew it, his son was already leaning against his side, his head on his shoulder.

"What am I supposed to do?" He asked helplessly, as if those smarter than him were still not trying to find an answer.

"You have to... try to be the best version of yourself. And just listen to others when they say something you're doing or saying is upsetting them. For example, I really don't like having to pick you up drunk from the park."

Wilbur looked up slowly, looking at him with a very apologetic expression.

"Am I in big trouble?"

Phil couldn't quite honestly say that he was not affected at all by those large eyes, full of inexpressible hope. Fortunately, over the years he has at least learned to pretend he had become immune to them.

"Very big. You'll be lucky if I ever let you out of the house again."

Wilbur grimaced but made no attempt to protest.

"But don't be mad at Techno. He didn't know," he just asked, which was certainly a nice gesture in the name of brotherhood, but somehow it didn't make Phil really stop being angry with either of them.

Wilbur endured two weeks of meekly going home straight from school before begging and arguing that he had undergone a profound change and gotten wiser. And two more before Phil actually believed it. He couldn't say that from then on everything was actually as perfect as his son had promised him, but it certainly felt a little calmer in the house. Wilbur fell silent, stopped insulting everyone for just any reason, teased Tommy less often, and maybe even became a little serious. He also became much more inclined to talk, which drastically reduced the number of "surprises" and Phil began to really believe that the worst was over, at least until Tommy decided to jump into the place that had just been vacated.

It was then, just over two years later, as Phil was beginning to feel secure and safe again, that Wilbur dropped the bomb on them.

"I'm not going to college."

Phil, busy packing lunch for his youngest child, making sure that none of the sandwiches were accidentally hit by the toxic pepper, didn't react at first. Only after a moment, when the kitchen grew suspiciously quiet, he slowly put down the knife, wiped his hands, and turned away from the counter.

"What do you mean, you are not going?" He repeated, still balancing between hoping he must have misheard and looking around for a hidden camera.

Unfortunately, none of his sons moved from their seats or discreetly gave him a sign that he was being screwed into something and that he was going to be on youtube at any moment. Techno froze with a spoonful of cereal halfway to his mouth and only stared between his father and brother. Tommy, so far bent on breaking his record of spelling errors in one message, stopped tormenting Tubbo for a moment and pricked up his ears.

Wilbur, standing in the doorway, shifted uneasily under the pressure of the three piercing glares, but kept his face blank.

"I'm just not." He shrugged, and only nervously rubbing one foot against the other showed that he was not as confident as he would have liked. "I thought it over and I see no point."

Phil was damn curious to know exactly when that great moment of enlightenment had come, since not more than a month earlier his son had brought home college pamphlets from around the country himself and had sorted them from most interesting to boring even before anyone could join him on the couch. Techno knew perfectly well where and what exactly he wanted to study and seemed more than pleased when his future university landed in the group of those representing the absolute last resort bordering on a waste of money. Tommy, on the other hand, was grumpy all evening and refused to even be persuaded to watch movies together. Phil later found him asleep in his brother's room, wrapped in a blanket, with Henry pressed against his chest, his hand clasped over the blue teddy sheep.

"He wanted me to play a little for him," Wilbur had explained in a whisper, carefully setting the guitar down. "You know, 'while there's still opportunity'."

He winced slightly as he looked away, and Phil just stood in the door, not quite knowing which child he felt more sorry for at the moment. Only later did he come closer and perch on the edge of the mattress, carefully brushing Tommy's hair away from his forehead.

"I'd love to hear it, too," he said, and Wilbur smiled, in that slightly sad way that always seemed to leave an aftertaste of bitterness.

Maybe now it was also about sheer longing. Maybe he felt suddenly less confident, too overwhelmed by the vision of being on his own, in a whole new place, among strangers. Maybe he was just having a bad day and everything seemed completely wrong, and he was trying to do his best to maintain an old, familiar routine.

Phil hoped very damn well it was one of those things that could be easily repaired or waited patiently.

"If Wilbur doesn't go to school, neither do I!" Tommy announced, breaking the remaining silence, which on the one hand relieved some tension, on the other made the situation a bit more real.

Phil tossed the sandwiches into the box with a little more panache than necessary, and slid them down the length of the table.

"You go to school and there's no discussion at all," he said firmly. "Finish your breakfast and jump to the car. I'll come to you soon. Wilbur." He turned to the older child, completely ignoring the younger's complaints about the injustice of the world and the conspiracy of all adults to destroy his most beautiful years. "What exactly have you 'thought over'?"

Wilbur shrugged, pretending to be staring directly at him while moving his gaze around him, strategically avoiding his face.

"Well, everything," he replied indifferently, as if it was about the color of his new shoes, not a huge part of his future.

Phil wasn't sure if it irritated him more, or if it only made him believe that nine years earlier, he should have confined himself to a puppy. Maybe two.

"But you wanted to go."

Wilbur rocked on his heels.

"But I don't want to anymore."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Techno, so far busy trying to disguise himself as a decoration, put the spoon back in the bowl a little too loudly and immediately raised his hands defensively as Phil glared at him accusingly.

"Don't look at me like that, first time I heard it, too," he said quickly, which sounded bloody unbelievable and would absolutely not convince anyone who had known the brothers for more than two hours. And Phil, as funny as it happened, had a very long career of catching their every little lie.

Somewhere in the yard there was a sound of a horn, announcing that Tommy was losing his patience, slipped into the driver's seat and gave one final warning before he tried to start the engine himself and would most likely drive the car straight into the garbage can. Phil looked first at one son, then at the other, trying to figure out which one to focus on first, but the horn sounded a second time, this time longer, so he finally resigned himself to the loss.

"We'll talk about it when I get back," he announced with all the seriousness and severity he could find in himself. "And I would like a little more detailed explanation."

As it turned out, he could expect a million things, and there was no guarantee that he would get even one of them. Wilbur was stubborn. Like hell. Which meant Phil might as well talk to the wall and ask her to kindly consider moving a few inches to the left.

Wilbur said 'no', and he had absolutely no arguments, especially since he still hadn't given a single reasonable reason for his decision. Phil, in extreme desperation, pulled Techno to his side, but only got an hour-long fuss, after which the brothers didn't speak to each other for a good three days.

Wilbur decided to quit his education here and now, without any explanation, and, in fact, there was no way to make him change his mind. At most, Phil could ground him for eternity and forbid him from seeing Sally, but as damned enticing as it would have been, the more conscious part of his mind told him that he would only seem more desperate. And like a despot and a bit of a liar, because he himself always assured his sons that they shouldn't be influenced by any means and should do with their lives what they were really interested in and for what they had a knack for. If Wilbur didn't feel ready to go to college and wanted to wait a while (hopefully not forever), it made best sense to let him do it and help make the best of his time.

Therefore, two weeks later, when Phil found his older children in the living room, surprisingly already reconciled and able to share a common space, he made no attempt to restart the discussion, ask or persuade. Instead, he sat down in the chair and stared at the film himself for a moment without even the slightest bit of concentration before looking at Wilbur.

"You're not changing your mind, are you?"

The boy didn't even take his eyes off the TV, although he tense clearly and pulled his legs a little closer, clutching the pillow in his arms.

"Nope."

"And nothing I say will matter?"

"Nope."

"And you won't tell me what's really going on?"

Wilbur's hands tightened on the pillow, but his face remained blank.

"I already told you." He shrugged. "I just don't want to."

Phil took a deep breath and held it for a moment before he sighed very, very heavily, until his ribs ached.

"All right," he said, and two faces immediately turned to him, one full of hope, the other of indignation. Phil chose to focus on the latter, surely not because he was temporarily reluctant to look at Wilbur. "What? I can't drag him by force."

Techno raised an eyebrow.

"But I can," he said, nudging his brother with his foot. The latter, of course, gave him back immediately, but he took the wrong shots and was lying on the floor in a moment, knocked down with one jerk, complaining about a surprise attack and a potential shoulder dislocation.

Phil, exceptionally, made no attempt to intervene.

He no longer tried to convince anyone of anything, he did not try to advise, he focused only on concealing his disappointment and not revealing that deep down he might actually hold a slight grudge against his son. With the latter, he felt bad enough as he kept them to himself

and, in solitude, tormented himself by putting his own ideals over the happiness of his own child. Especially since he still had a second child, at the exact same stage of deciding about his future, who needed his attention and time .

Though Techno knew at least what he wanted and he kept going no matter what. Phil would definitely prefer him to choose the college a little closer to home, and ideally not to travel at all, but other than that, he couldn't be more proud of his son. And he was saying it too often.

"Are you afraid that if you stop reminding me about it for a moment, I'll change my mind and stay, too?" Techno sneered as they rifled through the wardrobe to choose as few clothes as possible for as many occasions as possible. The trunk capacity was limited, as were the dorm rooms, and it was more than enough for the boy to insist on lugging half the bookcase with him.

They were left alone because Tommy, of course, got bored of helping out after a few minutes, and for the next half an hour he tormented Wilbur until he finally agreed to play with him on the console. Time and time again there was laughter and raised voices from the living room, breaking through the loud music, but the upstairs room was in a rare peace for their home, and for the first time in a long time Phil was able to really hear his own thoughts.

And he also perfectly heard the note of unease hidden behind the joke.

He froze for a moment, T-shirt in his hands, bent over the suitcase, and as he slowly straightened up and looked over his shoulder, Techno was sitting on the bed, staring at his socks with his expression all but amused.

"Once..." he began, but hesitated and pressed his lips together as he pulled the sleeves of his sweatshirt over his hands. Phil gave him a moment and pretended that the exact folding of his clothes was now his top priority in life, before closing the suitcase and sitting down on the mattress beside him. Techno shuddered slightly, distracted from his thoughts, and shook his head. "When you said you were adopting me, you also said... That this would always be my home." He took a deep breath and paused for a moment before gasping out in one breath, "It's still relevant, isn't it? Even when I leave?"

Phil blinked a little surprised.

"Of course it is," he said immediately, almost automatically, because he might have had many doubts in his life, but never on that one point.

Techno relaxed his shoulders a bit, but his knee was still twitching nervously.

"And if I wanted to stay, could I?" He made sure, glancing at his father and looking away just as quickly.

"Of course."

"And..." He pulled his sleeves so tight that the seams survived the test only by miraculous intervention. "And you're not at all glad that you finally have the opportunity to get rid of me?"

Most of the time, Phil could confidently say that in the last few years he had learned to expect absolutely everything, accept every creed stoically, and remember that the world doesn't revolve around him, and sometimes it isn't about his feelings at all. Sometimes his children still had more instincts, and he didn't have to give any particular reason, doesn't have to do or say anything wrong, or fail them in any other way, to make them assume the obvious worst-case scenario. He learned to accept this state of affairs and be a bit kinder to himself, and maybe he even actually slept a little more calmly thanks to it, and a little less often recalled every possible mistake.

But it still hurt like hell.

"Oh, Techno..." he sighed, his whole body struggling to hug his baby and at least thus prove what he thought of such an absurd idea, but he restrained himself, leaning down instead so that he could look his son in the eye. "If I could, I would keep you here forever and never let you go," he assured, placing his hand carefully on the fingers still clutching the sweatshirt, feeling with satisfaction as they relax a little at his touch. "But I think that you wouldn't be happy with it."

Techno smiled, pale and still hesitant.

"Wilbur would complain a little," he admitted. "But Tommy would agree if you took Tubbo too."

It was the last one that nobody in their family doubted. If his friend was involved, Tommy had no limits and was able to do almost anything, including eating six hot dogs in a row. Unfortunately, his stomach turned out to have a slightly higher standards. Wilbur had sworn he wasn't trying to trick him at all and had absolutely made no promises to take him to the park on the weekend if he could eat ten, it was all bullshit, childish imagination and terrible slander - but somehow no one believed it.

Phil also didn't believe that one joke could completely solve the problem, especially with Techno.

"You don't want to go?" He asked, squeezing his hand a little tighter in a short, silent reassurance that he could be completely honest.

Techno shook his head.

"I want to," he said. "No, I really want to," he repeated emphatically when Phil raised an eyebrow. "It's just..." He grimaced as he ran his free hand through his hair, once, twice, and then the third, clenching his fingers a little tighter before he realized what he was doing and quickly withdrew his hand. "It's stupid, because so much time has passed and I shouldn't be afraid anymore, but somehow... Somehow I feel that I wasn't here long enough. With you."

He looked embarrassed, as if he was admitting something wrong, and perhaps he truly thought that missing a home that he hadn't even left yet was childish and should never be mentioned. He was never good at talking about feelings, and at times he seemed to still believe that anger was the only emotion he was really good at showing and which he was entitled to. At times he was still the same little boy, unsure of what he might or might not say

and preparing for the worst just in case. All this meant that Phil understood him even better now, and he could see even more clearly that there were still wounds that even time could not fully heal.

Sometimes he himself felt as if it had been weeks, perhaps months, since the children had entered his life. Sometimes he was still shocked when Wilbur served him something from the top shelf in the kitchen without having to set up a pyramid of chairs and a stool. Sometimes he couldn't get used to the fact that Techno was driving the car, instead of sitting in the back seat and barely touching the headrest with his head. Sometimes he didn't understand when Tommy was suddenly uninterested in home-made popcorn and watching Up for the millionth time, and preferred to go to the movies with his friends to try to slip into a PG-13 movie.

He was proud of his children, individually and all together, and loved seeing them grow up to be wonderful young people. But could anyone really blame him for this silent desire that they would grow up a bit slower?

He spread his arms wide, and it wasn't even two seconds before Techno slapped his face right in the middle of his shirt, hugging him tightly and almost pushing him on his back. Phil might still see him as ten years old, but he definitely weighs a lot more.

"You'll still be here," he promised, part to his son, part to himself. "You will still be part of the family, even if you go to the end of the world." He leaned in to kiss the top of his head. "And you'll still be my little boy."

Techno didn't back away, but he hummed in dissatisfaction.

"Okay, but don't ever say that in front of my friends," he snorted, so Phil, of course, kissed him again.

"I love you."

"Ugh, no, that one either," he said, pouting, but despite the twisted expression on his face, he was the first to say it a few days later, when Phil drove him to the train station. And then again, when he called at two in the morning because the new room was too quiet, too dark, the mattress too hard, there were not enough blankets, and no one was playing the guitar right outside the wall. Wilbur had to get involved in fixing the latter by sending his brother some of his songs to the phone. The rest was handled by Dream's move in, with his million regrets a day and his computer always on.

Phil could come to terms with an empty room and an empty chair at the table. Just as he could (and had to) come to terms with the fact that his sons would never fit in one hundred percent with his every expectation and wish.

So when a few months later Wilbur suddenly announced that he had found a job, a flat and was moving out in a week, he only asked:

"Is it because of Sally?"

Of course, he got the negative answer and in a very indignant tone. After all, Wilbur's girlfriend was the embodiment of all virtues, she never did anything wrong and aspired to the title of a saint while still alive.

"Totally because of Sally," Techno said when Phil shared the revelation with him over the phone. "She moves him around as she likes, and that moron still thanks her for that."

It was hard to disagree with that. Even harder - to accept the idea that there was nothing he could do about it. His son was grown up, stupid but grown up, and he had to learn from his mistakes. Even if some of them were idiotic, easy to avoid, and absolutely everyone around him warned him about them. Wilbur was stubborn and had to figure it out on his own before it even hit him. Phil was able to accept it.

What he couldn't accept was the silence.

He understood a few days without a phone call, really, the fact that he would prefer to talk to his children every evening did not mean that they would find time for him as well. But Techno somehow managed to save a moment two or three times a week to say he was fine, his grades even better, and he still managed to keep from murdering Dream with his bare hands, preferably in the middle of the night. Even Tommy would come out of his cave every once in a while and talk about everything he did with his friends at school just to avoid learning. In the case of Wilbur, it was difficult to even be sure that he was still alive.

At first, as promised, he called regularly, but quickly began to avoid work. Phone calls had become a rarity, he only sent text messages more and more, and eventually Will stopped even answering Techno's calls, which had never happened before. He could be silent for a week, and then send the usual "Can't now" when they were all debating whether to call the police or hold off. Finally, exactly four months after he moved out, he fell silent completely.

Phil was more than concerned as he cooked dinner and poured the soup into jars. He was fucking furious and ready to put it in very firm, blunt words, the kind that, with a bit of luck, would end up where it needed to be. He was angry when he packed the jars in the bag and checked that they were not leaking. And as he started out of the driveway, trying to call his child one more time just to find out that his phone was off. He was angry when he looked for a parking space under a gray, dilapidated block of flats, he was angry when he climbed the stairs and he was angry still when he knocked on the door because the bell turned out to be broken.

He was angry, waiting way too long for someone to kindly open it for him.

And then he immediately stopped when someone did, and Wilbur appeared in the doorway, pale and emaciated and staring at him in utter horror.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Look, new chapter! I made it with @Katricia help! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur looked terrible. His face was pale and sunken, with deep shadows under his eyes, dirty hair sticking to his forehead, and he seemed to be millimeters away from the boundary beyond which one conducts philosophical conversations with God Himself. Phil tried very hard not to judge. Judging and reproach have never been a good idea, especially when you had three adolescent boys with a trauma list that could be used as a bingo card. Nevertheless, the last time he saw a man so tired with his life was a few years ago in the mirror, after all his children had caught the flu at the same time. After three days of running from one room to another, forcing Wilbur to eat anything, restraining himself from tying Tommy to the bed, and convincing Techno that there was an exactly zero chance that anyone would swap his medications when he just looked away for three seconds, Phil figured that that was what a hell designed especially for him must be like.

Well, there was also that one time he went to visit his eldest son in the dorm, and Dream continued to sob in the corner because George had just broken up with him for the third time in a month. But even he smelled better than Wilbur did right now, in his old tracksuit and socks so dirty they were a good inch thicker. Phil hoped softly, faintly, that maybe at least aside from his deplorable state, Wilbur shared Dream's reason as well. Of course, breaking up with someone close was always painful and he felt very sorry in advance, but he couldn't quite honestly and without hesitation say that he would be really sad if it were Sally that were to disappear from their lives once and for all. Especially from Wilbur's life. Maybe, deep down, very, very deep down, she was just as nice (to someone) and exactly as cute as Wilbur tried to convince them, but somehow Phil didn't feel like breaking through the thick and unpleasant surface. He didn't like the tone she used when talking to his kid, or the way she looked down on absolutely everyone, and he certainly didn't like it when she looked at the adoption certificates on the wall on her first visit to their home and without a second after reflection, said that she personally couldn't imagine raising "Someone else's brats".

"She's such a bitch," Tommy said, and Techno, though he was standing right next to him, didn't even swing to whack him on the head for "swearing in front of the elders." He himself had an argument with Wilbur that same evening, and they didn't speak to each other for a good few days until another one of Dream's hysterics reunited them.

Meanwhile, Sally had become a regular visitor to their house, which they had all learned to endure with the utmost reluctance and gritting of their teeth. She couldn't count on more, and she had never quite erased the horrible first impression she had made that day. Phil was willing to bet she hadn't even tried.

As now, he was willing to bet any money that no one but Wilbur himself would be hurt by her disappearance. Tommy could tease Wilbur for comfort, and Techno would at least try to pretend he understood, but deep down everyone would breathe a sigh of relief. Wilbur deserved better. He deserved a healthy, lasting relationship, and Phil firmly believed that the strange, wildly quarrelsome relationship he had had with Quackity in his time was closer to the title of a healthy relationship than anything between him and Sally. And that spoke for itself.

Nevertheless, setting aside his own prejudices and a satisfaction he would never admit, standing on the threshold of a corridor he hadn't seen in months, Phil forced a smile and swallowed all his comments about Wilbur's appearance, questions about relationship status, and even a request to open the window and ventilate the apartment at least a little.

"Hey," he said instead, because the silence was already dragging on and the atmosphere was thickening unpleasantly.

Wilbur didn't answer. He was still standing with his hand on the doorknob, staring at his father as if he didn't quite know how to put the facts together and analyze what he saw, and with each passing second Phil felt more and more like an uninvited guest.

"Maybe I could come in?" He asked, trying very hard to make it sound like a little joke, not a rebuke. "I brought you dinner."

As proof, he raised the bag, though he had no idea why he suddenly felt the need to explain himself. He had the right to visit his own child, especially when said child suddenly fell silent for almost two weeks and stopped answering the phone.

Wilbur slowly shifted his gaze lower, for a moment he studied the bag, still with the same expression of absolute absence of even one single thought, and finally returned to staring at his visitor with wide eyes. He opened his mouth, then closed it without saying a word. He looked again at the plastic bag, at Phil's feet, still a good ten inches on the wrong side of the doorstep, again at the wrapped food, and suddenly paled as if someone had torn all the colors off his face with one sharp tug, revealing the utter horror beneath them.

Phil had seen many more panic attacks in his life than he would have liked. Enough to know when one of them was just starting, enough to understand that there's not always one coherent cause, it's not always about him, it's not always about something he did or said. But it wasn't enough not to feel guilty in advance and hate how helpless he was in the face of feelings that he will never be able to fully understand.

"Hey, hey, Wilbur, look at me." He hurriedly put down the bag, not caring how unpleasantly the jars rattled against the concrete, or even that some of them might not have survived the meeting. He took a step back, big enough to give his son more space, but still stopping close enough that he wouldn't think he was just planning to leave. "It's okay, nothing's happening. I won't go in if you don't want to. I can leave your food for you and come back another time. Or you can put your shoes on and come home with me, how about that?"

Wilbur didn't answer, which was hardly surprising, because judging by the expression on his face, his thoughts were so far away that not a single word could reach him. His chest rose and

fell far too quickly, his breathing was shallow, and he still looked like a trapped animal, expecting an attack every second.

Phil, just in case, moved a little further away, slowly raising his hands.

"Wilbur, take it easy," he repeated a little louder, trying his best to sound firm and gentle at the same time. He wanted to get through to him somehow, but not scare him to death. Although it might be a bit late for the latter. "Breathe. Like I used to teach you, remember? Inhale and exhale. Can you do that for me?" He raised his hand a little, and Wilbur obediently sucked in a breath. But that was where his capability ended, and as Phil's hand dropped, instead of a longer exhalation, high, choppy sounds came out of his mouth, something between a squeal and a sob.

Fuck. It was bad, it was very bad, they were standing in the middle of the staircase, at any moment one of the neighbors could look out of the apartment, and in addition he still had no idea what was going on.

"Wilbur, please focus on me," he asked, a little more desperately. "Whatever happened, you're safe now. We'll figure something out, I promise," he assured, which for some reason not only didn't help at all, but made it even worse, judging by the way Wilbur curled his arms and glanced briefly at his own hand, a little tighter on the doorknob. Phil definitely wished he wouldn't make use of it. He had a strong feeling that slamming the door would start real hysteria, and he wasn't sure which one of them would take it worse.

"I won't go in if you don't want to," he promised once more, taking another step back as proof. It flashed through his mind that before the next one he would have to look back to make sure he wouldn't fall down the stairs. "Whatever happened, you can tell me. You know you can," he added, desperately and in need of any confirmation. But since Wilbur seemed as far from this certainty as possible, Phil had no choice but to swallow his pride, ignore the knife stuck in his heart, and try again from the other side. "Or I can call Techno if you prefer. It'll probably take a while, but he'll come if you ask. Or I can go get Tommy," he added, though he knew in advance that he might never get over a loss to a twelve-year-old.

To tell the truth, he never quite understood why it was with his younger brother that Wilbur calmed down the fastest. For all his undeniable charm, Tommy was... well, a child. Loud, stubborn and at times still not understanding their own emotions, not to mention others. But maybe it was one of those puzzles in the universe that he just was never meant to understand.

"That's because he can still jump. Like a flea," Techno once said as they sat in the living room waiting for the youngest member of the family to perform his magic rituals on the floor above after all other methods had failed. "Wilbur said that once," he added quickly, as if that explained absolutely everything. And, in a way, it did. "Because sometimes when I'm having a bad day, I just... I look at Tommy, too, and he's, well, himself." He grimaced significantly. "And I think that in any other house they would kill him for it and he would quickly stop being like that. And then I remember that we're with you, and it doesn't bother you, and somehow... Somehow then it's easier for me to remember that I don't bother you either."

Phil couldn't say he really understood. Just as he didn't quite enjoy the fact that his boys had someone to remind them that they didn't need to be scared, not when they still needed a reminder, and would probably need it forever, from time to time. But when Tommy ran down the stairs half an hour later, demanding popcorn and his favorite movie, and Wilbur joined them in a few minutes, still visibly shattered, pale and red-eyed but smiling and hungry for closeness, all that mattered was that he had them all close, safe and sound.

He would have given a lot to convince Wilbur of that now. And maybe by some miracle he finally succeeded, because the boy relaxed a bit, blinked a little more towards consciousness, and after a moment's hesitation he opened his mouth to speak. Exactly at the same moment, somewhere in the depths of the apartment, a cry, loud, high-pitched, could be heard, one of those that only an extremely unhappy infant can give out.

Wilbur froze, mouth still open, eyes wide, face so pale it almost blended with the whiteness of the walls. Phil, no less shocked, instinctively stepped back and nearly slipped his foot off the first step. He grabbed the railing at the last moment to keep his balance, and when he raised his head again he was in the corridor all alone. The baby's scream was still heard from behind the half-closed door of the apartment, but Wilbur was nowhere to be found, only the lunch bag was right where it had been before. Phil picked it up a little instinctively, a little not sure what to do next, before finally, after a few more seconds of waiting for any sign, he pushed the door open without waiting for any invitation. Sometimes the instincts were just right, and obeying them was the only sensible solution. Especially when it was about a small child in the apartment, the only tenant of which was already an adult.

He was prepared for the fact that there might be a mess inside. First, because Wilbur was never particularly clean, and second, because it would be very naive to expect something different from someone who looked as if he had spent the last month living alone in the wild with no running water. However, he didn't expect the apartment to look so tragic. In fact, against the background of the enormous mess, Wilbur stood out almost like a white, clean stain he was definitely not. Phil didn't even know what to do with the jars that they had brought - there was no room for them on the table, sagging with dirty plates and bottles and half making it a changing table, and he was a bit afraid that they might stick to it permanently when placed on the floor. Eventually he slid them onto the refrigerator, which for his own good, he preferred not to even open, and, picking through the toys scattered on the floor, he walked through the living room, stopping only at the bedroom door.

The small room looked much better, maybe not quite neat, but it was definitely cleaner. Phil made a note of it somewhere in the back of his mind without paying much attention to it. He was too busy staring at his son, leaning his hip against the wooden frame of a baby crib, swaying a crying infant in his arms with a bit of a clumsy motion.

Perhaps he was stupid. Perhaps he was too naive, since he had had two sort of adult sons for some time now, and at least theoretically it should have crossed his mind at least once that something like this might happen. That one of them might turn out to be a lot less responsible than he always thought they were, that something might go wrong, that one day he might be told that he would be a grandfather, just like that, without any notice. Yet somehow it never occurred to him.

Maybe he trusted his children too much. Maybe he was too reassured that Techno showed absolutely no interest in relationships, and all of Wilbur's subsequent relationships with literally anyone seemed to have more to do with making Quackity angry than serious plans and deeper feelings. Maybe in his heart he still saw his sons as little children who were only playing adults.

Or maybe it was because his boys were never biologically his, and he was too used to the idea that children don't come from chance and are more or less a deliberate decision.

Whatever the cause, reality decided to correct him that second, by surprise, slapping him on the head with all its might.

"Wilbur..." he began, not quite sure what he was trying to say. What should he say at a point where he was still trying hard to convince himself that it was not like that, when all the signs in heaven and earth said yes, exactly like that. "Wilbur, whose child is that?"

His son flinched, but didn't even glance his way, still focused solely on the blanket-wrapped baby.

"His name is Fundy," he said finally, softly and more to himself than to anyone else. The little baby in his arms whimpered, but he silenced him quickly, making that soft, rustling sound Phil knew so well, the one he still had to use himself sometimes, because no matter how old they were, his sons were still just children. Children who had been deprived of a large part of their childhood, who should not yet be expected to be mature, and who should definitely not be bothered by crying babies.

He swallowed, taking a step forward, clinging to the last of his hope.

"That's not what I asked."

Wilbur looked up, but still didn't look in his direction. Instead, he stared straight ahead, blank, unseeing eyes, and suddenly the first tears ran down his cheeks.

"Sally left us," he whimpered, not even trying to wipe his face. Or maybe he just didn't know how to do it, hands still clenched on the blue blanket.

Phil almost physically felt the last of his naive hope escape from under his fingers.

"Oh. Oh, Wilbur," he sighed, barely recognizing his own voice, not even knowing when he had opened his mouth. "What did you do?"

It certainly wasn't the best thing he could say right now. It would be better not to say anything, because even his own voice seemed too harsh, and the disappointment too obvious. But he was not prepared for it, and he had no idea how else to react when it wasn't going to be all right, and nothing would get better, because children who show up out of nowhere don't disappear so easily.

He could pretend he wasn't disappointed when Wilbur chose not to go to college, though God knows his boy was too smart to miss such an opportunity. He could pretend to understand

when he wanted to move out, and when he clumsily pretended that Sally hadn't moved in with him at all, and even when he called less and less, until he finally stopped altogether. He could keep saying that he wasn't mad and let his son make mistakes as long as they were all easily fixed, so they could start over when he finally got a little wise. But this couldn't be fixed, and there was no magic way to get over the consequences. It should never have happened, but it did, and Phil wasn't sure he would ever be able to forgive himself for not preventing it.

Wilbur should have his whole life ahead of him, he should plan the future instead of holding it in his arms, whimpering softly with his every move.

But it was too late for that, and Phil could only stare at his baby, still deeply under the illusion that it would all be just one bloody long dream.

Wilbur sniffed loudly, absolutely not a figment of imagination and a simple dream.

"I wanted to tell you, really," he cried, and oh, that sounded bloody real too, and like something he could say after he had done absolutely nothing in that direction. "But... But at first we didn't know what to do with it all and Sally needed some time, and then... Then somehow there was never a good opportunity and I didn't want to tell you alone and she didn't want to come with me and I know it's stupid, but..." He paused, taking a shallow, teary breath, his fingers tightening on the blanket. The baby stretched, waving its little fists in the air, but made no sound. As if even he too wanted to know if even one of the upcoming excuses would sound a little less childish and exactly like the reason why this whole situation shouldn't have happened at all. "And then I had to tell you that I wouldn't go to college and you were angry. I know you were," he added with a distinct reproach that Phil didn't understand until he found himself willing to lie and deny it even now. "And if I told you why I couldn't go, you'd be angry with Sally too, and that's not her fault. And... And then it was too late and I couldn't just show up at home with a baby because you'd be angry that I didn't tell you sooner, so... So I wanted to wait, so I could show you that I can handle it and that I don't need any help and that I won't... I won't be a burden on you again or anything. And... And then Sally changed her mind. And she said that it was too much for her and that she didn't want to live like that. So I said it's a little late for that now, and she..."

He paused for a moment and looked down at the baby as if he was almost surprised to find it still in his arms.

"Sally wanted to give him up for adoption," he said finally, so softly Phil was almost sure he had heard it. He wanted very much to believe that he had misheard. "She said we could find someone to take care of him better than we do. And maybe she was right, because... I don't even know if I'm holding him well and he's still crying and I think I'm hurting him somehow, because babies probably shouldn't cry so much. And I know he's small. They all want babies, always," he added emphatically, with some still unworked pain and regret. "And if he were lucky, maybe he would actually be found by someone like you. But I still remember it all and I wouldn't be able to... I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for that."

If Phil had been any less shaken, overwhelmed and tired, he would probably say he understood. If the situation had been a little less serious, he would have admitted outright that he had always found Sally to be a selfish bastard without a hint of empathy, and that he

wasn't the least bit surprised that he was right. If they were home now and Tommy was sitting next to him, Phil would have let him call her a "bitch" and wouldn't even scold him for swearing. But they were in a small, dirty apartment, and he still hadn't shaken off his first shock, so he just stared at his son, and the baby in his arms, and clung to the thought that at least this one time he hadn't made a mistake. On at least one topic, he actually knew his child as well as he always thought.

He wasn't at all sure if it was good. He had no idea if it was the right decision or if he agreed with it, because Wilbur didn't sound, look, and certainly wasn't ready to be a father. But there was something comforting about him wanting to at least try. Some kind of comfort in knowing that even if he did so many stupid things, he still has a minimum of responsibility.

And definitely more than a minimum of regret, judging from the moment his shoulders stiffened, his face hardened, and when he looked down at his baby, everything in his posture screamed that he would never let anyone look at him even crookedly.

"We argued. Me and Sally," he said, his voice losing with each word the confidence and strength he had just gained "I yelled at her and she packed up and left and I thought she would eventually come back because she did that sometimes, but then she texted me not to look for her. And she didn't answer the phone and she didn't come back so of course I went looking for her and asked everyone but no one knows where she might be, or they just won't tell me, and Schlatt couldn't sit with Fundy anymore, so..." He inhaled and bit his lips, trying to hide their trembling. "So I guess I'm alone now."

Phil was absolutely sure he should comment on it somehow. That he should say aloud at least one of the million thoughts he had in his head right now, all somewhere on a scale between utter horror and utter fury. That now, in the sudden silence, he finally got a chance to comment on all this mess, which he didn't expect to find here at all. But since he was still too shocked to make any decisions, he chose blindly, without much thought, and guided by everything but reason.

"You left the baby with Schlatt?!" He asked with absolute indignation, as if it really mattered. As if it were more important that his grandson had spent at least an hour in the presence of someone Phil wouldn't entrust a goldfish to than the fact that any grandson even existed.

He blindly felt the chair with his hand, pulled it a little closer, and fell heavily on it, hiding his face in his hands.

"Christ, Wilbur..."

He had a great, fucking great desire to get up, grab his son by the shoulders, shake him and shout at him like he had never done before in his life, but apparently should have. The only thing that held him back was that he wanted to hug him just as much, to assure him that everything was going to be all right, and to protect him from the whole world, as he had always tried to do.

As a result, he didn't do anything, and he had no idea whether it was a good decision or a bad one.

"How long ago?" He asked instead, taking a deep breath and straightening up in his chair. At least one of them needed to remain calm, and there was no indication that Wilbur was going to take on the task. Rather, he looked as if he wanted to run away to his room and hide under the bed, where, as is well known, no obligations or consequences can get you. "How long has Sally been gone?"

Wilbur didn't meet his eyes.

"A month," he just mumbled and sniffled.

"How long after giving birth?"

"Three weeks."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, inhaling deeply.

"Christ..."

Wilbur sniffed a second time.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered, and this time it was really hard not to see the little boy in him, who messed up and was afraid his father might stop loving him.

Phil really wanted to assure him that nothing like this would ever happen. But even if it was the truth, he temporarily couldn't bring himself to say it aloud. For the moment he was angry and bitter, and so damn disappointed that he didn't have the strength to do anything else. They could talk about it later, when the two had cooled off a bit and Wilbur had slept off the weeks gone by, cause God knows he looked like he hadn't blinked an eye for a minute since he was alone with it all. They will have all the time in the world to discuss feelings when all three are safely home and determine what they want to do with it all next. But it won't happen until they very literally peel off the floor.

"Not now," he said dryly, but the baby was whining again and Wilbur looked like he was three seconds away from crying himself, he immediately stretched out his arms, pointing at the blue bundle. "Can I...?"

To his surprise, Wilbur stepped back as if burned. He literally jumped back, clutching the baby so tightly to his chest that he whimpered softly, frightened by the violent gesture, and if Phil had the courage to accept that thought at all, he would have to accept that his son is simply afraid of him.

"Listen," Wilbur began, controlling his emotions with obvious difficulty, and with each word of his, denying the painful truth became more and more difficult. "I know it looks bad. But this- it's only temporary. Because I don't really know what I'm doing, but I'll learn, I promise. And I'll clean it all up, he just has to stop crying for a moment, but it'll be fine, really, and it doesn't always look like that, just now, because Schlatt was busy and couldn't come to help, but I'll get it, I promise."

Phil felt his stomach twist uncomfortably.

"Wil-

"And I know the neighbors are complaining," he continued, faster and more tearful, gasping for shallow breaths and blinking back tears, "but he's small and little children cry and it's not his fault that I have no idea what he wants. But now... I'm doing better now, so give me a little more time, I promise we'll be fine. We'll be fine and you won't have to worry about anything and..." He squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing down the tears. "And I'll make it quiet, I promise."

Phil was skilled at dealing with the idea that he wasn't, and would never be, the perfect father. It might not sound particularly good, but in his defense - he had heard just as often that he had too high expectations of himself and that he himself was setting the bar too high. He had a serious tendency to blame himself for things that he could never control, and he often forgot that he himself was only human and had the right to be angry or just plain tired. But never in all the years of fatherhood had he been so disappointed with himself as he was at this moment. When his son looked at him fearfully and truly believed that he would not only let someone take his baby away from him by force, but even do it himself.

He was absolutely sure that it would take many hours of therapy to get this thought and guilt out of his head. He had little time to feel sorry for himself at the moment, though, not when everything was pointing at the idea that Wilbur would really think he should run away, wearing only socks, no jacket, and with a crying baby in his arms.

"Wilbur." He raised his hands slowly, trying to show that he absolutely wasn't going to take anything from anyone. "Breathe. It's all right," he assured him, and then, as the boy still looked like he didn't believe it a bit, he made himself add, "I'm not taking him from you."

He felt as if he were actually confessing to a goddamn serious crime, though he never even thought of committing it. Most importantly, however, Wilbur actually relaxed a bit and took the first deeper breath.

"You promise?" He made sure, because one knife in the heart was absolutely not enough.

Phil had put a hell of a lot of work into making sure he didn't frown.

"Of course. God, Wilbur, I would never do that. Come on." He took a step forward, reaching his son's shoulders and squeezing them lightly to show that he really wasn't going to hurt anyone, before he moved his hands down to the blue blanket, which was both the cleanest thing in the room and the dirtiest thing he had touched in a long time. "Give him to me," he asked, and this time Wilbur actually relaxed his grip, letting him take over the slightly swaying bundle. "Fundy, right?" he made sure, correcting the alignment of his arms. "Pack your things, we're going home."

Wilbur didn't need to hear it twice. He immediately bent down to get his bag out from under the bed, and began hurriedly stuffing all the contents of the crib, including pillows, inside.

"I don't have a seat," he realized suddenly, freezing with a rattle in his hand and looking at his father with such an expression as if he expected to hear that then it would be difficult, they must stay here. "To the car. I don't even have a pram."

In his heart, Phil sighed very, very hard as he put both of these on an already long grocery list.

"We'll survive somehow," he concluded shortly. "Take his food too, all you have," he ordered, and Wilbur immediately tossed his bag over his shoulder and ran out of the room as quickly as if he had been given a time limit. Phil made no attempt to stop him. In fact, he didn't want to stay in this place any longer than was absolutely necessary.

He looked down, getting a closer look at the baby for the first time. Fundy was... well, just as ugly as most babies. Small, wrinkled, with a tuft of reddish hairs on a disproportionately large head, and an expression of absolute dissatisfaction that a stranger suddenly came so close.

"Hey Fundy," he said, smiling and rocking his bundle slightly to stifle the incoming scream. The little one made absolutely nothing of it and cried out loud, stretching as if meeting the floor was a better option than spending even a minute in such nightmarish company. Phil couldn't help but think he would like Techno for sure. They certainly shared the first impression of him. "I'd rather meet you in different circumstances," he admitted, bouncing the baby gently in his arms. "But I guess I'm your grandfather."

Fundy, for obvious reasons, didn't reply. But when Phil turned to face the door, Wilbur was already standing in it, bag slung over his shoulder and an expression that said more than any words possibly could.

"I'm ready," he just said, wiping his eyes surreptitiously.

Phil chose not to comment on the suspiciously few things he was taking. Or that all the clothes in the bag belonged to Fundy. Or even the fact that he had the bag with jars of lunch in his free hand. They could talk about it later in a better place, time and circumstance.

Chapter End Notes

Phil: What did you do?

Wilbur, holding a baby: ...How detailed explanations do you need?

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

@Katricia helped me with this one (and teach me what a difference between paprika and pepper is in english, lol)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Fundy didn't like car rides. Maybe because Wilbur was gripping him a little too tightly, curled up in the back seat, as if he planned to wrap all his limbs around the baby and turn himself into a human shield in the event of an accident. Maybe he really didn't like his neighbors constantly complaining about him and wanted to give one more farewell concert in the stairwell, and then it felt stupid to just stop. Maybe he didn't like the new fragrances, especially the disc-shaped air fresheners that Tommy hung up more of the more Techno complained about them.

Or maybe he was just less than two months old and he couldn't signal otherwise that he was damn hungry. Phil was most inclined to this theory, because as soon as they entered the house, almost literally on the run, he worked out the instructions for powdered milk and put the bottle under the boy's nose, and the screaming immediately ceased. Which was, so far, the best news of the day, the only one from which Phil won't get a headache.

Wilbur didn't even seem to notice that it was suddenly quiet. In fact, he didn't seem to have any deeper contact with reality at all. As soon as he took off his shoes and threw his bag off his shoulder, he immediately fell heavily on the couch, holding Fundy in his arms, perhaps more like reflex than consciously, because his head was swaying in all directions and he was clearly having trouble remembering that he had to open eyes every time he blinked. However heartwarming it might be, sleeping on the couch wasn't the healthiest option, especially when it looked like a coma rather than a short nap. On the other hand, Fundy huffed softly, finally full and probably pleased to find himself in a less contaminated place for a change. There were no sounds from the second floor, and no one ran down the stairs, stamping terribly, demanding attention, dinner, and a change for a ticket to go to Tubbo. Which meant Tommy hadn't come back from school yet, and there was no specific reason in the near future for Wilbur to have to hide in his room, if he didn't want to be talked to death.

But in all the chaos, with so many things going wrong and most of them not easily fixed, Phil needed a little bit of stability, including a few little things right in their place, and just as they should be. Starting with his son, safe and sound in his own bed.

Besides, Phil wasn't going to take him to the pool twice a week once he made a pretzel out of his spine through his own laziness.

Wilbur flinched and looked up immediately as his fingers tightened in the air and the baby suddenly vanished from his embrace, but as soon as he saw his father above him, he immediately relaxed and sighed heavily.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm awake now," he muttered, holding up his hands, though it was obvious that he was exactly one second from falling asleep. "Give him to me, I- I'm fine."

He definitely wasn't "fine" and Phil wasn't sure if he trusted him at this point enough to leave him alone with the baby for a second. On the other hand, he still had a lot to do, and the infant occupying both hands made his daily duties very difficult. Besides, Fundy's presence seemed to be the last line between Wilbur and a complete nervous breakdown. For all of them, balance in the universe had to be kept, at least for a while.

But Phil wasn't absolutely surprised that as soon as he had time to go through the contents of the bag, put the laundry in, and change the sheets in his son's old room, rightfully with such self-assurances that he was fine, awake, and please give me my baby back right now - Wilbur was already asleep like a stone, slumped low on the couch, with knees pulled high up to the chin, neck bent at a slightly natural angle, and a fully awake baby trapped between his chest and thighs.

Seeing the upcoming rescue, Fundy immediately waved his fists with a very displeased expression, but it was hard to tell if he was more angry about not being given his due attention or simply expressing extreme disapproval of his father's parenting abilities. Phil would never say it himself, not aloud anyway, but he fully agreed with the latter.

Especially since this time Wilbur didn't even notice when the baby slipped from his hands; he just curled up into a slightly more comfortable position and took a deep breath, his chest at last devoid of a very literal weight. He didn't wake up until a good twenty minutes later, when Phil sat down next to him and gently nudged his shoulder. He sprang to a seat, looked down at his empty hands, and immediately paled, looking around in panic.

"Hey, hey, take it easy." Phil grabbed his shoulders just as he was about to jump to his feet. "He's upstairs, asleep. I guess he got tired during the trip."

Wilbur froze for a second, processing his words so loudly and intensely that he might as well have repeated them aloud, before finally sinking back into the couch, reassured and with one heart attack to his account. Apparently these inclinations run in the family.

"Oh. Okay, yeah, I guess... I guess so." He nodded, then closed his eyes, briefly hiding his face in hands. It was impossible to judge what was more in this gesture: fatigue, helplessness, or the usual conscience-stabbing awareness that he had brought it all on himself and that he had no one to blame.

Phil was quietly counting on the latter. And maybe it was a bit cruel on his part, but he always believed more in natural consequences than in any punishments. Wilbur was an adult, no one could stop him from watching late-night TV or hanging out with friends, or even reminding him that if he didn't do the dishes, he would end up having nothing to eat from. But the universe has always found a way to bend the rules to suit its needs. Would Phil prefer his son to understand this in slightly less dramatic circumstances such as losing electricity to

unpaid bills or not having enough coffee to drink in the morning? Of course. But sometimes there just wasn't another way, and Wilbur was always so damn stubborn...

He didn't seem stubborn now. Rather, he felt like he had collapsed somewhere between denial and coming to terms with his fate, and didn't have the strength to move even a step further.

"I didn't take him outside before," he confessed, slowly lowering his hands.

Phil raised his eyebrows, a little surprised.

"Not once?"

"I didn't know if I could. He's so small... And I didn't really have a way."

Under other circumstances, Phil would have decided it probably didn't matter that much. The fresh air was certainly a nice bonus, but no one kept a baby in the basement or a cave, away from any sun. But his nose was still twisted at the mere mention of the sticky smell of dirt all over the apartment, and all he could do was pray that Fundy wouldn't accidentally get asthma in the family's relegation as well.

"You don't really need a stroller right away," he scolded mildly. He understood that to a newly minted parent everything was new and not at all obvious, really, he understood all too well, but there were some limits. "Babies don't weigh much."

Wilbur looked at him as if he had said something completely nonsensical and detached from the subject. Then he blinked, opened his eyes wide, and shook his head.

"No, no, I mean... I don't have a jacket for him. Or shoes. Or anything like that..." Each word came out softer and quieter until he fell silent for a moment and stared at his feet with the same expression with which he had once looked at mathematical equations. No thoughts, only fear. "I don't even know if babies wear shoes."

Although it was an important topic that needed to be discussed in depth, Phil figured that there would still be a chance to sit down together over a shopping list, which would absolutely contain at least five different parenting guides. And shoes. Until then, however, Wilbur's thoughts were elsewhere, and holding him by force in the real world seemed to be the height of cruelty. He learned a lesson, he suffered all alone, he deserved at least a short break.

With that in mind, and without further ado, Phil picked up the still-hot mug from the table and carefully slid it into his son's hands.

"I think that's the last thing you should be worrying about now," he said when Wilbur looked down, but had misjudged both distance and his own strength, so he nearly landed his nose in the tea.

"What is it?" He asked, wincing slightly at the smell.

"Melissa. To calm you down, because you're all shaking." He waited a moment to make sure the tea wasn't going to accidentally land on the couch before placing a hand on his son's

shoulder, squeezing it lightly. "Drink, take a shower and try to sleep," he commanded rather than asked, because no matter how calm he tried to pretend, he still wanted to stick his head in the pillow and scream until he lost his voice completely. He needed a moment to collect his thoughts, and seeing his child three seconds from the collapse didn't help. "And take these." He pulled a pack of new earplugs from his pocket, a must-have ever since he allowed Tommy to get hooked on online gaming. "I have a feeling Fundy doesn't really like me. I'll take care of him," he added as Wilbur opened his mouth to protest. And maybe it was the firmness in his voice, or maybe it was just plain tiredness, but the boy obediently closed his mouth and slowly nodded. Phil used this chance to tuck his hair behind his ear and find out that yes, it was actually exactly as dirty as it looked. "Try not to worry about anything and rest. I can't yell at you when you look... like this. And I really want to." He smiled reassuringly, although they both knew full well that no, he was not really joking. "Come on, get upstairs."

He patted his son on the shoulder once more before he withdrew a hand, but he didn't even get to his feet before Wilbur grabbed his elbow tightly, holding him in place.

"Are you very angry?" He asked, quietly, hesitantly and probably not wanting to know the answer.

And Phil was very reluctant to give him one.

Perhaps it was that he had seen his children scared and associated the adult's anger with the necessity to run away a little too often. "Really bad means it'll hurt if they catch you," Techno had said, and Phil hadn't been able to shake those words out of his mind for the past nine years. And he probably would never get rid of them, not when they were spoken with such absolute, unwavering certainty and conviction that this is how the world works.

Maybe he has become too submissive as a result. Maybe he believed a little too much that his children, no matter how many stupid ideas they might have, were basically damn quick-witted and knew when they were going to cross the line any minute. Maybe the ramifications of this had just surfaced, and maybe in the whole situation he had been to blame even more than Wilbur.

But even knowing it all, Phil still hated being mad at his kids. Even if the vast majority of times they really deserved it, even if there was nothing strange or unnatural about it, and he sincerely believed that showing emotions openly was much healthier than collecting them so that one day they might explode at the worst possible moment. No matter how many times he would explain it to himself, how many times the therapist told him, and how often his sons pointed out the little lies themselves, he felt equally nasty with his own anger. As if admitting it, he was putting his children to the test and making sure they trusted him enough to remember that he would never hurt them.

And even if the answer was always positive, it didn't make him feel any better.

So he didn't answer right away, instead reaching for Wilbur's hand and squeezing it lightly before pulling it away a little more firmly.

"We'll talk later," he said, and by some bloody miracle, even that sounded more like a plea.

He wasn't at all surprised that Wilbur hadn't taken it seriously, and instead clung to his fingers, so hard it was almost painful.

"But are you?" He asked, with the same desperation he always did when he got into trouble and wasn't sure if someone would help him get out of it or just leave him to himself.

And Phil, as always, realized that he would do absolutely anything to stop Wilbur from looking at him with such fear.

"Very," he admitted, against absolutely everything.

Wilbur's face sank, his eyes instantly moist, and he quickly loosened his grip, pulling back his trembling hands.

"I'm sorry..." he muttered on the exhale. Which, of course, made it even worse.

Phil looked down at his suddenly painfully empty hands. And then up to the ceiling where, in his own bed, in cushions and blankets, was sleeping a little boy who should never have been here, not yet.

"Wilbur." He leaned out so that he could reach his son in his newly seized, defensive position. He changed his mind at the last moment and instead of on his cheek, he put his hand on his shoulder, waiting for a moment for the boy to actually look at him, still hesitantly, shivering at his touch, but with a gleam of hope. "I'm angry. More than ever before, but still less than you think," he added, hoping Wilbur would understand what he was trying to say.

And maybe he did understand, because he sniffed loudly and nodded, making the most unhappy face in the world without trying to explain himself anymore. He never accepted that he couldn't always get reassurance that everything was fine, no one was holding a grudge, and they could happily pretend that nothing happened at all. Phil had no heart to make it any more difficult for him, so while deep in the heart he would still want to tell him to get out of his sight and stay out for at least a few hours, he leaned in to kiss his forehead.

"I love you. It hasn't changed and never will," he assured. And then he sighed very, very hard. "But gods knows you sometimes put my patience to the test..."

Gods, if there was any, apparently were merciful, in their strange, twisted way, because just as Phil felt his resistance begin to weaken, and his son's despairing gaze was breaking his heart a little too much, somewhere from upstairs flew first a soft whimper, followed immediately by a loud cry of a very unhappy child.

"Oh-o." Phil immediately seized the opportunity to jump off the couch and jog toward the stairs. "Fundy wasn't in the spotlight for more than two seconds. True crime. I'm beginning to see a certain resemblance..." He winced slightly at the mere thought, but when he glanced over his shoulder, his gaze softened immediately. "Go to sleep," he said once more, before leaving his son alone.

He had managed to find that Fundy wasn't one bit happy to see him, and definitely didn't consider his grandpa worthy to be allowed to carry him around the room and brazenly

silenced at the same time, before, between screaming and shouting, he heard a door creak in the room at the end of the corridor.

* * *

Coming to terms with the fact that he not only became a grandfather, but also, by some miracle, didn't even get the statutory few months to get used to it before a new human being came into his arms for the first time, was a long, arduous and bloody tiring process. And it was also very effective at engaging thoughts and superseding everything else, as it quickly turned out. Phil liked to think that he was really well organized most of the time. He had his own small, proven routine, which he improved day after day at the expense of sleep, nerves, and probably a bit of good senses, so that he could say with a clear conscience that yes, his house is clean, his fridge is full and his dishes are washed (except these days, when Tommy was in charge). He had no idea who he was "trying to show off to," as Skeppy had once called it, but he knew perfectly well that he didn't like it when one unplanned disturbance made everything go straight to hell. Like now, with the front door slammed downstairs, shoes were thrown carelessly on the floor, and Phil suddenly realized that it was almost four o'clock, he forgot to put the potatoes in, the meat was still in the freezer, and if he orders pizza for the fifth time this month, the supplier eventually would start calling him by name.

"Daaad..." A very dissatisfied voice from somewhere near the kitchen let him know that all these errors had already been noticed by a watchful teenage eye. "There's nothing to eaaat...!"

It was a lie so great that it was even harmful, because just yesterday they came back from shopping, tugging bags so heavy that they probably almost ripped the trunk of the car, but, once again, a teenage eye. Perfect to remind you of the slightest mistake, blind to the entire contents of the refrigerator.

Under normal circumstances, Phil would be downstairs listing what they did have and what was most edible, as long as you weren't too lazy to spend two minutes making a sandwich. His hands were occupied for the moment, though, and every time he tried to put Fundy back on the bed, he would wake up immediately and loudly demand attention. Phil hoped silently that he just didn't like the new surroundings or the smell of the sheets, and wasn't really as clingy as his father, but as he lost feeling in his hands, he began to come to terms with the sad truth and the laws of genetics.

Since screaming over the head of a just asleep baby was definitely not the best idea, he kept pacing the room, rocking the baby a little harder every time Tommy called for him again.

"Dad?" When he finally stopped yelling and ran up the stairs, his voice was already slightly anxious. "Dad!"

Even though he insisted that he had grown out of it a long time ago, he still didn't like being left alone for long periods, especially suddenly and without warning. Less than a year earlier, Phil had made a terrible mistake of going to the store before his youngest child returned from school, and without leaving him any note. He was sure he would have time to do his shopping, or that Tommy would just call him if he felt confused. Instead, he had to leave the nearly full basket in the middle of the supermarket and break a few traffic rules as he rushed to Bad's house, on whose couch Tommy curled up under a blanket, mourning his new tragic fate of an abandoned orphan. On the positive side, at least Phil was sure his son knew where to look for help. On the negative side, Tommy was mortally insulted at him for the rest of the day, and only bribed by ice cream, admitted that maybe, but only maybe!, he got a little too carried away, and the next time he would at least try to call first.

He seemed to be starting to panic slowly now, too, for he almost burst into the bedroom, flushed, eyes wide, breathing quicker. He looked around, not even noticing at first that he was not alone, and only after a few seconds did he blink, relax and let out a loud breath.

"Da- Phil!" He was indignant, puffing his cheeks and already lifting his leg to stamp it, before he remembered that he's very grown up and absolutely doesn't do such things. As a result, he hummed even more, crossing his arms over his chest and slouching like the little gremlin he really was. "You didn't answer me! And I called! And there's nothing to eat!" He added after a moment of reflection, probably unable to come up with any better argument.

Phil took a deep breath, holding it for a moment. He loved his youngest child, really, even if he had a tendency to express all his emotions so that all the neighbors within a kilometer radius could hear him. But Fundy definitely didn't share that adoration, judging by the way he fidgeted nervously, his grip tighter on the blanket.

"A little quieter," he said, trying his best not to make it sound too harsh. In recent weeks, Tommy had become extremely irritable even for a typical twelve-year-old, and insisted on questioning every command he was given, whether it was brushing his teeth or helping with household chores. Phil tried to be patient. He tried to summon a layer of understanding that he had hoped not to use again since Techno stopped deliberately making his life a living hell. He tried not to comment or demand too much, and he absolutely never happened to look at his son and think about how wonderfully quiet it would be in the house if they repeated the play with the raccoon in the basement.

Thank gods, this time Tommy did obey. Not entirely on purpose, because he immediately turned red, frowned and was already opening his mouth to say anything except "of course, no problem, I'm going to do my homework now, and I'll take out the rubbish on the way." But then his gaze finally fell a little lower, and Fundy stretched and whimpered, torn from his nap for good.

Phil froze as if struck, instinctively tightening his grip.

Tommy stared at the baby, mute in his shock and his mouth still open.

Fundy didn't care about any of them, and continued to wriggle, kicking his feet in all directions.

It wasn't the best possible introduction. There was definitely a better, less direct way to get the message across, best to wait for Wilbur to wake up and kindly introduce the rest of the family to the mess he'd made. But it was too late for that, and all Phil had to do was limit the damage and make sure his first grandson didn't end up on the floor.

"Tommy," he began, shifting his gaze from one child to the other, not quite knowing which one needed more attention at this point.

Fortunately for him, the baby gets a bye.

Tommy blinked out of shock, took a step forward and held out his hand as if to touch the bundle to make sure it was indeed alive. But he quickly withdrew his hand, frowned, deeply thinking about something, and then, all of a sudden, a wide smile appeared on his face, the kind of bloody maliciousness that didn't bode well for anything good.

"Ooh!" He grinned looking at his father as if in his mind he was already planning to have the best time of his life at his funeral. "Techno will be sooo furious!"

Phil decided to pretend the thought didn't make his stomach turn.

"Tommy..." he sighed, but once again he didn't get a chance to think about what he was actually trying to say.

"You promised him." His son, by contrast, was as eloquent as ever and ready to help at any moment to dig a grave for him. "You said no more kids. You promised-" The smile suddenly faded from his face, replaced by fear. "Hey. But I won't give up my room. No way." He took a step back and glanced quickly over his shoulder, presumably about to run at breakneck speed to turn his bedroom into a barricade. "You can take Wilbur's room, he doesn't live here anyway. Make him share."

Phil would have given a lot just to have such problems at the moment.

"Nobody's going to take anyone's room, take it easy."

Tommy's eyes flashed.

"We can lock him in the basement," he whispered, and it was hard to judge how much he was really joking. Or who exactly he means.

Just in case, for everyone's safety, Phil decided to take the worse option.

"Absolutely not," he cut in firmly, bouncing a child who thrashed more and more strongly in his arms. "And quieter, please."

Tommy, completely unaccustomed to the fact that anyone could be louder and more grumpy than himself, stared at Fundy for a few seconds appraisingly, as if trying to establish a telepathic bond with him and see if he had an enemy or an ally in him. Phil had no idea which possibility frightened him more. Or if there is any major difference at all.

Finally, after a few long, weirdly tense seconds, Tommy tilted his head, wrinkled his nose, and shrugged, tearing his eyes away from the baby as if it had lost all value in his eyes. Apparently, the negotiations were not successful.

"But seriously, Techno will be angry," he repeated, putting his hands in his pockets and rocking on his heels. This time he didn't seem amused anymore, rather anxious, as if suddenly realizing he was perfectly in the center of a potential catastrophe, with nowhere to hide. "He's gonna be fucking pissed off."

"Language," Phil scolded instinctively, a habit he picked up from Bad and somehow couldn't unlearn. He looked down at the face twisted with all the pain of an extremely difficult infant existence, and smiled reassuringly in case the child turned out to be a genius after all, understood what they were talking about and felt hurt. "And Fundy's not mine."

Tommy froze in a half-step before he slowly lowered him to the floor.

"Oh." Was his only comment. At least at first. "But if he's not ours, what's he doing here?"

This way, they reached the more difficult part of the story. The one Phil didn't feel like telling, not only because he didn't feel like doing Wilbur's job, but also because the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had failed as a father himself.

Of course, that wasn't what Tommy was supposed to or needed to hear, but that didn't mean that the whole painful, emotional experience wasn't happening, hidden away from his ears.

Fundy calmed down a bit, and for the first time, it wasn't like carrying a bomb. When he wasn't crying, he was a really sweet baby, even though he hadn't gotten out of the wrinkled stage, looking rather ugly, and like absolutely none of his parents. Although he certainly didn't inherit big green eyes from his father. Maybe the upturned nose and slightly protruding ears...

Phil adjusted him in his arms, sliding the blanket a little lower to get a better look. He couldn't remember ever holding someone so small and vulnerable for so long. The sensation was as stunning as it was terrifying, in the same weird, indescribable way that he used to be afraid of hugging his sons for the first time. Like suddenly someone's whole life was in his hands, and he could only hope that somehow he wouldn't destroy it.

"I said he's not *mine*," he repeated emphatically, "not that he's not *ours*."

The boy, as far from reflecting on life, death and responsibility as possible, looked at him with incomprehension.

"What?"

The fact that absolutely nothing had dawned on him was depressing on the one hand, and on the other, it gave Phil hope that for a good few more years he wouldn't have to worry about a repeat of today's entertainment.

"Wilbur will be delighted to explain it to you later."

Tommy raised an eyebrow.

"What, he brought him here?" He snorted, evidently not expecting an affirmative answer, because he immediately widened his eyes and inhaled loudly. "Wilbur brought him here," he repeated in a whisper, his eyes widening with each word. "He stole a baby?"

Phil bit his tongue at the last moment not to say 'I wish'.

"Of course not. It's his baby," he explained, feeling a painful twinge in his chest as he heard how fucking unreal it still sounded. "His and Sally's."

Tommy looked like a goldfish who accidentally discovered that there was a whole big world beyond a little aquarium.

"Wilbur? With Sally?" he made sure and it was hard to judge which part of the puzzle shocked him more. But the final image certainly disgusted him as such, judging by the way he grimaced. "Ughhh, nooo, gross. Why would he do that?"

Phil couldn't have said it better, even with the entire dictionary at his disposal.

"Trust me, I'd love to know too."

"But she was so mean!" Tommy was still excited, turning in place and gesturing vividly to make sure that his invisible audience understood the seriousness of the situation. "And a ginger!" He added with even more indignation, then tilted his head, suddenly curious. "He's ginger too?"

He stood on tiptoe to see better, but made no attempt to get any closer to the baby. Phil was genuinely curious to know if Wilbur was actually sleeping deeply enough for all the screams to pass him by, or if he was just pretending so someone else would do the job for him.

"Tommy," he sighed, feeling the migraine looming on the horizon. "I beg you..."

The boy huffed, but stopped bouncing in place and shoved his hands back into his pockets as if he were trying to punch holes in them.

"Fineee. Jesus, why are you so sensitive," he grunted, returning to his favorite role of a martyr recently, innocently condemned to hard slave labor, and going to school in addition. Yes, he had something to eat, he had something to drink, he also had a new Playstation and a computer - but at what cost? "Hey, but he won't stay here, will he? Wilbur has his apartment, let him keep it that way."

This was, in a sense, quite the correct point. And, by the way, a topic they haven't touched on yet, and which Phil hasn't had the right to decide on. Even if he couldn't imagine the possibility that his son would pack his bag in a few days or weeks or even months, decide that he had abused his hospitality enough and disappear a second time to ignore the calls again and pretend they didn't exist. No matter how responsible Phil felt for him and how much he temporarily disbelieved in his supposed maturity, he didn't have many real arguments for stopping him other than trying to reason and playing on his emotions.

But it was one thing to watch an adult son face the big world which he suddenly felt like discovering, and another to stand aside and watch him unknowingly and for the sake of good intentions harm his own child. He had no doubt that Wilbur was trying. That he really went out of his way to tackle a task he wasn't ready for, and that he would most likely sacrifice his own health trying to provide Fundy with everything he needed. Unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that even that was sometimes just not enough.

Phil has learned, in the most dramatic way possible, that while he always tries to give his children a choice and a free hand, he's still their father, and sometimes he has the right to get his own way and assume that he just knows better. And he was just going to take advantage of it now.

"Wilbur's staying here for now," he said firmly, pressing the bundle a little tighter against his chest. "With Fundy."

He glanced down, almost expecting some kind of protest, but the baby only turned in his embrace, surprisingly agreeable for a being even the least related to Wilbur. Most likely he also preferred clean air and a caregiver with slightly less sleep deprivation.

Tommy, for the sake of balance in the universe and in case Phil's life accidentally got too easy, was very far from consensus. So far away that he couldn't even see it on the horizon and never considered it.

"But that's not fair!" He got indignant, and this time he actually stamped his foot before he could stop himself. Phil raised his eyebrows, glancing significantly at his foot, and that seemed to make matters worse, for the boy blushed up to the tips of his ears, puffed up his cheeks and hunched even more. "When I brought a spider, you told me to bring it back to the store," he grunted reproachfully. "And you made a fuss that they sold it to me!"

Phil winced as he remembered his little private 'Karen moment', though deep down in his heart and mind he still thought he was right. Anyway, he would not call it 'a fuss'. He just gently explained how blind and stupid you have to be to believe a ten-year-old who said that of course he's eighteen, he has a large terrarium in the house, and that shoe box is just for a while, for ease of transport.

"Because he was poisonous, and you and your brothers have already taken enough restful sleep from me," he explained as patiently as he could, although by repeating the same for the tenth time he was really beginning to understand why some parents prefer the "Because I said so" as an answer. "I don't need to be afraid that some hairy monster will eat me at night."

For Tommy, that explanation was by no means satisfactory. He probably even considered it one of the arguments for keeping a multi-legged abomination in the room.

"Shroud wouldn't hurt anyone," he grunted, puffing up his cheeks. Then he looked at Fundy as if he wanted to see if he, too, by chance had more than two legs. "It's not fair. Wilbur can make himself a baby, but you forbid me from everything."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, mentally counting to ten. The migraine was coming close faster and faster, waving at him cheerfully.

"Tommy, for God's sake..."

As usual, Tommy showed him no mercy. Instead, he severely strained his nerves, turning on his heel and walking out of the room like a hailstorm.

"I'm going to Tubbo's!" He shouted as Phil stepped out into the corridor, bouncing an increasingly anxious child in his arms. "We're gonna watch movies!" He tossed his backpack over his shoulder as he slammed the door to his room. "Because he understands me, not like you!"

He ran down the stairs, stamping as loudly as possible. Slamming the front door was a completely redundant icing on the cake, because Fundy had enough noise anyway and decided to let him know by shouting over everything around. Phil cursed under his breath as he started pacing the room again, and although his blood was starting to boil, he tried to hum as quietly and as calmly as possible. A few minutes later, when Fundy finally let himself be calmed down, they were both a little calmer and a lot more tired.

"But at least he took a sweatshirt," Phil sighed, smiling at the baby, almost expecting some answer.

He almost fell asleep in this expectation, sitting on the bed with his back against the wall and one hand on Fundy's stomach, because only constant physical contact could soothe him. Unfortunately, when he was already putting one foot out of awareness, his cell phone vibrated in his pocket, thankfully silent. He sighed deeply, but reached for the phone, firmly convinced that Tommy had just realized that the next bus was a half an hour away and would try to demand a lift. He was close because although the name on the display didn't match, it was still one of his children who remembered his existence. And even wanted to see him!

"Techno..." he began as soon as he picked up the video call, and really tried to sound normal, but the first word turned into a heavy sigh and he felt faint at the thought that he would have to pretend something. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, resting the phone on his knees. "Sorry, this is really not the best time."

If Techno noticed his tiredness and absolute lack of will to live, he decided not to comment on them out of politeness.

"Oh, okay." He nodded, reaching for the phone to adjust it to a slightly better angle. He had dark circles under his eyes, hair in a sloppy bun, and more books on his desk than Tommy had read in the past years. He looked like a typical student who barely has time to wash up and boil sausages in a kettle, for which he would normally be scolded on the spot, but temporarily get away with it. Phil had neither the strength nor the mood to beg the third child in succession to stop being so horribly self-destructive. "I just wanted to ask you what you've done to make Tommy want to move in with me again." He smiled crookedly, rolling his eyes. Phil tried to return the gesture while adjusting the pillow under his back, but the effect was that the phone slipped off his lap and he didn't have time to hold it in time. "And why not to Wilbur's-"

The sound stopped so suddenly that for a moment Phil was sure he had accidentally lost the connection. But when he picked up the phone, his son's face still occupied most of the screen,

much paler and frozen in absolute shock.

At first, Phil didn't understand. But then Fundy hummed, very unhappy that he had taken his hand off, and that was enough for him to add two and two.

Great. So they had the second acquaintance out of their heads. And, for the second time, it went completely wrong.

"Dad." Techno spoke just as he almost managed to find the right words. "I know that technically I don't live with you anymore," he continued, his voice dry and sharp. "And technically you can do whatever you like." He paused for a moment, and when he opened his mouth again he seemed a lot less angry, and just bloody hurt. "But you promised."

Phil was on the tip of his tongue that, indeed, no one had asked him for his opinion on the matter, and he had not asked to be a grandfather himself, too, before his still-dazed mind gained momentum and realized what he was actually being accused of.

Oh.

Oh.

"No. Gods, Techno, no," he quickly disagreed, unable to bear the full reproach of his eyes. "Fundy's not mine, absolutely not."

Techno didn't believe him right away. He could tell by the way he frowned, almost piercing him with his eyes, while still looking like a small, world-angry boy who never wanted another little brother and was ready to announce it to everyone around him, loudly and emphatically. Eventually, second after second, his face softened, his shoulders relaxed, and he exhaled loudly, brushing his hair back from his forehead.

"Oh," he just said, and fell silent again. Phil didn't rush him, letting him breathe after a moment of fear. "Okay." He nodded at last, and his lips twitched slightly in a smile. "Okay, because you might be a bit too old for that," he sneered, probably expecting to hear an equally sharp answer. When nothing of the sort happened, he blinked, frowned, and leaned in slightly as if it meant he could see the baby tucked away from the frame. He opened his mouth, closed it, looked at his father once more, and slowly raised his eyebrows. "Wilbur...?"

Phil was very curious to see what other possibilities he saw in this situation. He even made a mental note to ask when he would be less busy self-tormenting and taking responsibility for other people's mistakes.

"Wilbur," he nodded, dryly, briefly, and with a million resentments, reproaches and regrets condensed into one word.

Techno's eyes widened. He probably didn't expect that he might be right after all.

"Wait, really?"

"Unfortunately." Phil nodded, with pain so great that almost overwhelming. Then he looked at his oldest child with just as much indignation when he suddenly chuckled. "Very funny,

indeed."

"I'm sorry, it's just..." This time Techno laughed out loud, no longer embarrassed and not minding how profane it was for the seriousness of the situation. "Well, he's always been a moron, but I never thought he was that stupid," he explained, still way too amused, but also rightly so. Phil could, to some extent, agree on almost any word. And deep down the most with the tip.

But he was an adult, responsible (unlike some) and had to set a good example, so he only grimaced at his son scoldingly.

"I'm glad at least you enjoy it," he grunted, and indeed did envy him a little. Or rather his right to do so, innocent and not obliged to anything.

Techno immediately stopped laughing and looked at him almost insulted.

"What, you want me to cry?" He snorted. "For once, it's not me who fucked up. Shit, next to this, I'm a saint!" He tapped his hand on his chest, and Phil found himself actually making a mental quick count. After all, Tommy only disappeared from their lives for a few weeks. Fundy - was supposed to stay permanently. "And where is this idiot anyway?"

Phil, exceptionally and absolutely unsatisfied, was silent about insulting siblings.

"Sleeping."

Techno raised an eyebrow.

"You just let him go to sleep? I would kill him."

Even if he was just joking, and they both knew it, the vision was still downright indecently pleasant.

"Sometimes I'd like to let you," Phil muttered, and turned for a moment, part to make sure Fundy was still asleep, part to hide his anger. His conscience struck him immediately, however, and he sighed aloud as he tilted his head back and rested his head against the wall. "You would have to see him. He looked like he hadn't slept in months."

Techno hummed understandingly.

"So how old is this little thing?"

Phil moved the phone around so that Fundy appeared in the frame, in all his glory and glory, in blue rompers with little foxes and a hand clasped on his finger.

"Two months," he replied, not without a touch of affection, because whether planned or not, the boy was undeniably cute when he wasn't yelling or licking everything around. But then he turned the phone to face him, suddenly touched by a new thought. "Did you know Sally was pregnant?"

At first, Techno was so surprised by this accusation that he even forgot to take offense about it.

"Me?" He made sure, and almost looked around the room as if it could be anyone else. "No way!"

Phil looked at him closely, taught by experience that his children would lie and cover each other absolutely always and everywhere, (excluding, of course, those moments when they were snitching on each other). But the longer he stared straight at his son, and the longer Techno didn't look away, the more he came to the conclusion that this time the situation might actually be a little too serious even by 'twin' standards. If not for the sake of common sense, it was because Techno's dislike of Sally equaled, if not greater, his loyalty.

He relaxed his shoulders and nodded slowly, reassured.

"I had to make sure."

"Hey." Techno grimaced, clearly touched. "You don't think I wouldn't tell you, do you?"

Surprisingly, when he really wanted to, he could actually sound like someone who, two years earlier, hadn't really insisted that his brother was with him at Dream's, when Phil already had Wilbur in the backseat of the car, drunk and throwing up into the paper bag.

"You two always had your secrets."

"Yeah, but...." Techno shifted uneasily, probably also understanding that all the evidence was against him and he was damned. "But in the style of sneaking out a window date at night, not..." He made a vague gesture with his hand. "Something like that."

Phil frowned.

"Wilbur was sneaking out the window?" He repeated, truly delighted with the thought that he had to add another item to the long list of things he had overlooked, but his son waved him off as if nothing had happened.

"But with Quackity, take it easy, no kids included," he calmed him down, as always ready to ease a heart that he had severely strained a million times himself. Then he hesitated, thought for a moment, and frowned. "Where's Sally, anyway?" He asked. "You didn't put them in the same room, did you? They're stupid enough that this little one would get siblings right away."

Phil hesitated, not entirely sure he had the right to share the full story with others. Firstly, because Wilbur, staggering on his feet, on the verge of collapse, was a mediocre source of information. Secondly, because as soon as he gains some strength, he will most likely start trying to straighten out a few facts and start defending his ex-girlfriend, and the bad impression is very hard to erase. Especially if it comes down to 'She left me alone with the baby and just walked away'. On the other hand, it wasn't something that should be swept under the rug and excused, so after a little thought, Phil decided to be completely honest. He felt as if he had dumped his own emotions a bit on his eldest child, which he was definitely

not proud of, but Techno didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, he purred sympathetically at exactly the moments he should have, and finally nodded his head seriously.

"Wow. Tommy was seriously right. She's a terrible bitch," He summed up brutally and without a shadow of a doubt. Unfortunately for Sally, no one in the room was in the mood to plead for her, including her baby. "And what now? With that" he nodded to the side, somewhere outside the frame "little thing?"

Phil turned his head as well, studying the baby one more time. He still couldn't believe that he was actually looking after something so small and that Wilbur had to deal with a living creature bigger than a goldfish or even a rabbit. The very thought seemed as unreal to him as a child breathing calmly with his hands still clamped on his finger.

"Fundy," he said, a little instinctively and a little bit to say anything. "His name is Fundy," he repeated, feeling his throat tighten. "And I have no idea."

Techno nodded and smiled crookedly.

"At least I won't be the one with the stupidest name in the family anymore," he said, which was both the worst and best summary of the situation, and somehow was enough to push Phil off the last line.

He sniffed, wiping it quickly with the back of his hand and blinking to keep the tears from flowing. He didn't want to fall apart in front of his child, no matter how adult Techno was, it was Phil's role to comfort and support, and he didn't intend to reverse it for at least several dozen more years, when he would actually be too old to care about it. But the lump in his throat only grew, his eyes stung more and more, and he couldn't gather himself to just break the connection and spare them both of them this experience.

"Did I do something wrong?" He asked, wincing himself at how horribly desperate his voice sounded. On the other hand, he just demanded confirmation of his parental abilities, so he probably couldn't fall any lower.

Somehow, Techno still didn't look embarrassed by him, nor did he look like he was himself three seconds from the end of the conversation. He just moved the chair closer to the desk and leaned in so that his face was right in the center of the screen.

"If you gave him the same long lecture on safe sex as you did to me, I dare say you did all you could," he said, still a bit mockingly, perhaps trying to lighten the mood, but when the joke didn't work, he instantly became serious. "Hey, dad." His voice softened and he began to squirm in his chair, clearly not sure what to do with himself. Phil never said it out loud, but while Wilbur and Tommy by nature were always able to find a way to cheer others up, Techno was... much, much worse at comforting. Even assuming that what counts above all is good intentions. "It's not your fault. Wilbur had always been an idiot, that was to be expected. I mean, I was betting that he would run away and get married in secret, but this was also always an open option."

Phil was so far from rejoicing that his son confined himself to one mistake on the list and left the others as much as possible. For the sake of the whole family though, he decided to

assume that maybe in fact some things were simply written, doomed and he had absolutely no influence on them, no matter what he did. It didn't make him feel any better, much less make all his problems magically disappear, but it was enough to take a deep, calming breath.

"I mean it," Techno continued, still looking everywhere but at him. "I mean... Look at it. He had been hiding the baby from you for about two months, he didn't even mention the pregnancy, he practically lied to you and lived in some craphole with this little one... And left him with Schlatt," he added, and Phil gave a short laugh. "And you just took him home, let him go to sleep and now you're babysitting. Again: I would simply kill him."

Phil shook his head, trying to stealthily wipe his eyes.

"No you wouldn't. He can work on you, too," he said, which was absolutely true, because even if his boys argued more than they should, Wilbur always managed to win back his brother's favor almost out of hand and mostly without a single 'sorry'.

Techno must have realized that, too, because he grimaced and muttered something under his breath, but made no attempt to deny anything.

"Anyway," he continued, finally gathering himself enough to meet his father's eyes for all his obvious embarrassment. "I'm trying to say you're okay. More than okay. And you blame yourself unnecessarily every time we do something stupid."

Phil appreciated the compliment. Even if they were not the best words, he knew his child long enough that he could understand their message and immediately felt a little better at the thought that at least one person still trusted and appreciated him. Nonetheless, for all the sentiment flooding in, he couldn't shake off his stomach-clutching, persistent guilt, and the certainty that he had somehow failed as a parent.

"Because most of them I should have predicted," he sighed, to which he replied a very dissatisfied grunt.

"And we should have predicted consequences before we start doing something stupid. Stop tormenting yourself." Techno tapped the webcam as if to tidy it up and knocked the phone over, giving a beautiful glimpse of the once white ceiling. "I'm sure your therapist forbid you to."

Phil gently lifted his hand from the baby's belly and combed his thin, reddish hair. Fundy moved immediately, clearly displeased.

"My therapist will surely be delighted with this news."

They didn't talk for long, mostly because Dream had returned to the room and all serious topics had been put on hold until no one outside the family was pricked up and treated their problems like an online drama. Plus, Phil had a feeling Wilbur wouldn't want Quackity to know about the whole thing after all, and to say anything to Dream meant that in five minutes he would tell the entire campus and everyone on his contact list. He could be a really good friend if he wanted to, but he was a great gossip always and almost regardless of his will.

Tommy returned home just as Phil took a moment to prepare some sandwiches for dinner. He dropped his shoes anywhere and hung his jacket crookedly on a hanger, like all the children before him and probably after him in this house, but, surprisingly, he didn't run straight to his room to lock himself in. Phil jumped when he turned from the counter, plate in hand, and saw him in the kitchen doorway, still grumpy, hands stuffed into the pockets of his blouse.

"Oh. You're back." He smiled, trying to hide his surprise, because if he had learned something about teenagers, it's that they hate terribly when anyone reminds them of how rarely they want to spend time with their family.

Tommy shrugged and pushed his chair back, immediately bringing one knee up high under his chin and hunched over the table top.

"You didn't call," he grunted, more into space than someone in particular.

Phil sat across from him for a moment in mid-movement, trying to quickly remember if he had promised to do so.

"I thought you were watching movies with Tubbo." Just in case, he went to excuses in advance.

Tommy shrugged, tracing lines on the table with his finger.

"I was," he admitted. And then, with much more reproach: "But you didn't call."

Perhaps at this stage, after all he has gone through to put their little family together, Phil should actually develop his mind-reading skills. Unfortunately, for some reason, evolution insisted on not going that way, and he still had to confine himself to the old, proven, most of the time useless ways.

"Tommy, if you want to talk-"

He didn't even have time to finish when his son scowled at him.

"I don't want anything," he muttered, rocking his chair. He glanced through the door toward the stairs. "Wilbur is still asleep?"

Phil was fully aware that 'I don't want anything' meant exactly the same as 'It's not *you* who I want to talk to', but somehow managed to swallow the disappointment.

"He's asleep," he nodded, picking up his sandwiches. "Fundy too, so please try to be a little quieter, okay?"

Tommy winced, wrinkling his nose.

"He barely showed up and is already rearranging everything," he muttered dissatisfiedly. He was lucky that Techno was actually miles away from him and couldn't tell him the story of the chair's changing owner. "That's mine?"

He jabbed a finger at the sandwiches as if they might be waiting for someone else. Phil nodded.

"No peppers," he assured, and found with satisfaction that the boy's shoulders relaxed a bit, and a shadow of a smile flashed across his face.

And he should probably have left it in that state of armistice, but he wouldn't have been able to forgive himself if he hadn't at least tried.

"Tommy, if it's about your mom-" he began, but at the exact same moment that Tommy straightened as electrocuted, there was a loud baby cry somewhere upstairs.

Phil hesitated, torn between one child and the other, but Fundy did his best to let the world know how abandoned he felt, and won almost immediately.

"We'll talk more about this, okay?" Phil leaned over his son to kiss his hair as he ran and noted with some hope that Tommy hadn't pulled away. He grimaced, probably, and muttered something under his breath, but everyone was used to it by now.

What Phil was not used to was the weight of the baby in his arms and the more minutes of pacing around the room, hoping that somehow his grandson would eventually fall asleep.

* * *

It was almost ten o'clock, an hour when no one with a minimum of culture would harass others with a call, when Phil felt the vibration in his pocket a second time. He glanced quickly at Fundy, sleeping soundly under the blanket, one hand on the teddy bear, the other clamped around his finger, and reached into his pocket with utmost reluctance.

The reluctance surged as he glanced at the display, but forced himself to remain calm and the meager remnants of serenity.

"Hey, Phil!" Schlatt didn't even wait for him to speak. In his defense, he sounded stressed, and under his relaxed tone there was a very poorly concealed anxiety. "It's been years! Look, do you know where Wilbur is?"

Phil raised an eyebrow, even if no one could see it.

"At home," he replied shortly, moving his hand so that he could stroke Fundy on the head. Regardless of the circumstances, it was nice to have a child with him again, who not only didn't find all tender gestures 'embarrassing', but even needed them.

There was a moment of silence in the receiver.

"Well, he's not." This time, Schlatt spoke much slower and more carefully, clearly thinking carefully about each word so as not to reveal himself by accident. "I came to help him with something and he's not here and he's not answering his phone."

Phil grimaced, on the one hand happy that Wilbur had loyal friends, on the other hand - much, much larger - absolutely pissed that he had once again been its main victim.

"At *home* , Schlatt," he said dryly, not even trying to pretend he wasn't more than irritated. "Not in his apartment."

There was another silence, a little longer this time, during which he could almost hear the gears spinning in the interlocutor's head.

"But... alone?"

Phil looked at the phone in total disbelief. Mainly, because anyone in their right mind could really ask such a ridiculous question.

"Yes, I left the baby alone there, what bad can happen!" He snorted, trying very hard not to put into it all the frustration that had been gradually building throughout the day, but the effect was rather weak, judging by the fact that no one dared to answer him.

He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes, trying to focus on anything pleasant. Okay, one son of his became a teenage father and the other didn't even want to talk to him, but at least Techno did well in college. Still. Until he decided to dump it and become a gamer or something...

"You're a good friend, Schlatt," he said finally as the silence almost started ringing in his ears. "And I'm grateful that you helped him. But don't show yourself anywhere near me for a while now."

He hung up before he got any answer, but Schlatt made no further attempts to call, which probably meant he understood the order and accepted that he might temporarily forget the invitation to the family dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Before anyone asks - Tommy's being rude because he and Phil had an argument some time ago and he's still offended.

(It's a surprise tool that will help us later.)

Wilbur: I'm an adult, I'll take responsibility for my decisions, I can handle everything!



Also Wilbur: ...But are you angry? 🙄🙄🙄

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sooo... It's been more than two weeks... Hope you'll forgive me.
Look! I brought you chapter as a sign of peace!

And @Katricia beted it, so it's nice and shine :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil was no longer used to sharing a bed. Which certainly had its advantages, because after all the nights he had spent under the blanket the whole quilt for himself felt almost like a luxury. Nobody woke him up by rolling from side to side, nobody stabbed their knee in his side, his hand was not numb from the weight on it, and he was not awakened by a sudden shiver after a pair of ice-cold feet hit him right in the thigh.

And he missed every one of those things, slowly accepting the fact that his boys were growing up and needing his tenderness less and less, and they were complaining more and more about him making them feel ashamed in front of their friends. In the latter, Tommy was the master, constantly complaining that it was an incredible slander and a stain on his honor, to be driven and picked up from school like a child. It didn't bother him in any way, of course, to use the free ride - he just ordered to be dropped off around the corner, in the supermarket parking lot, and looked around carefully, as if lurking paparazzi were waiting at every turn. Phil chose not to comment on it as long as the boy, at least at home, still sat close on the couch and snuggled to his side whenever he had a bad day, and sometimes even, with utmost embarrassment, responded to "I love you." Although, admittedly, it did hurt a bit at times. Especially when he could have sworn that it had not been more than a few months since Tommy had officially become part of their family and began to check very intensively to make sure he had a permanent place in it no matter what.

Phil didn't even know at first that he was being tested in some way. Yes, he had seen Tommy deliberately knock a glass off the table, like a cat left unoccupied for more than three seconds, or making sure three times that he had definitely brought as much mud out of the yard as possible, but he wasn't the first child in their home with strange ideas. And certainly not the first to deliberately disturb Phil's everyday life.

He only realized when one night, maybe two weeks after Tommy had agreed to be adopted on the condition that no one was telling him to read anything, Phil was awakened by a scream and his own name drifting down the hall. Which in itself was a very good sign and in retrospect, in the light of day and after two coffees, he couldn't help but enjoy it. Firstly, because Tommy had stopped crying for his mom and thus breaking his heart, and secondly, because he usually ran straight to Wilbur with every problem, and even if it was childish enough, Phil was a little jealous at times. But now it was he who was called to the rescue,

very loudly and with great stubbornness, so yawning widely, he trotted down the corridor, repeatedly holding onto the wall to keep his balance in the dark.

He pushed the door ajar, but stopped in the doorway, not quite sure what the child might need. It happened that Wilbur preferred to be alone for a moment at such times, and only when the first shock passed and he calmed down a bit, did he allow any help. Once Phil had sat on the floor outside his door for over an hour before he finally heard a soft cry, but somehow he couldn't regret it. Much more than sleep, he needed the certainty that his son knew he would always be waiting for him, no matter how long, and Wilbur never complained, cuddling against him so tightly as if the world were about to end.

Techno usually pretended to be still asleep, even if a second earlier, his scream made the whole house stand on its feet. Phil wasn't sure if he was embarrassed or just extremely stubborn, but he made no attempt to ask or persuade him to confess. He just sat on the bed next to him and stroked the boy's hair until his breathing actually slowed and evened out.

And if sometimes Techno started crying soundlessly, with his face tucked in a pillow and his fingers clutching his father's hand - only the two of them would know that.

Tommy didn't look scared. He was sitting on the bed, in a tangle of sheets, most of which he had already kicked onto the floor, far too awake for the middle of the night, but also very far away from crying. He grinned as widely as he could and held out his arms, and Phil sat a little instinctively beside him and let himself be locked into his embrace, all the while looking around for danger. Only when he was sure that no psychopath was lurking behind a curtain with a knife did he relax enough to stroke the child on the back.

"Something happened?" he asked, suppressing a yawn. The adrenaline rush began to drop as rapidly as it had been soaring towards the heart attack, and the soft mattress began to tempt more and more.

Tommy shook his head.

"I just wanted to see if you would actually come," he explained carelessly, with a distinct hint of satisfaction. As if he had set the best trap in the world and now admired how amazingly it worked.

Phil rested his chin on the pale hair, closing his eyes for a moment, torn between affection and the desire to strangle his youngest child with his bare hands. Even though that would probably not be a guarantee that Tommy would not be calling him from beyond the grave.

"Okay." He exhaled slowly and leaned in to kiss the boy on the hair. "I'm here." He stepped back a little, raising his eyebrows, waiting for some more revelations. "Do you need anything?"

Tommy just swayed from side to side, still beaming like a little sun that should have long ago hid under the covers and graciously fallen asleep.

"No."

Phil wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh more or sigh deeply at his fate. Eventually he chose something in between and nodded, stroking the boy's back one more time before he pushed him lightly onto the mattress and covered him with the quilt before he could protest.

"Good night then." He kissed him quickly on the forehead, mentally calculating how many hours of sleep he had left if he fell asleep in exactly five minutes.

He didn't fall asleep in five minutes. He was very, very close to it, in the soft bed, under the warm duvet, but just as he was about to sail away for good, a second time, somewhere down the corridor, a loud call came to him:

"Phiiil!"

At first he hoped he had misheard. The sound repeated, however, if possible even louder, and he had to come to terms with the fact that his child simply had no mercy for him, whether he wanted it or not. It even flashed through his mind to ignore the exhortation, at least for a moment, to make it clear that he also has a life of his own and won't come running every time someone tries to do some strange experiment. But then he remembered how wide Tommy had grinned at the sight of him, and the thought that he might be sitting all alone this time, waiting for him, scared that no one was coming, was all it took to get him to his feet.

He regretted it a little, though, when he entered the room, and there was still no monster lurking outside the door. Only a disturbingly awake child, with the covers pulled over his head and a teddy cow pressed against his chest.

"Will you bring me some water?" he asked at the outset, raising his big eyes at him and not even planning to add 'please'.

Phil glanced to the side at the still-full cup on the bedside table, inhaled loudly, and held it for a second, before a little calmed down, he stepped closer and handed the child the glass. About half a meter away.

Tommy had the nerve to just get his mouth wet before carefully setting the cup down exactly where it should have been in the first moment.

"Thank you," he said, like a very polite child who absolutely never woke up a parent for no reason whatsoever. The little gremlin knew exactly what he was doing, and even knowing it, Phil couldn't deny that the sudden rush of warmth from around his heart had somewhat eased his irritation.

"Good night." He kissed the baby for the third time that night, and once again covered her with the quilt up to his neck. "Sleep already, I'm begging you."

His pleas had exactly the effect that was easy to predict: he didn't even touch the doorknob of his bedroom before he heard:

"Phiiil!"

This time he had to wait a few seconds and remember that yes, he wanted children and yes, he loves them more than his life, so no, he can't murder the youngest of them, because the others might take a very bad example from it. He was damn happy he calmed down a bit at first, because he had barely pushed the door open, Tommy immediately huddled a little more under the covers, a lot less confident than before.

"Are you mad at me?" He asked, much, much more quietly, and Phil felt an immediate surge of remorse.

"I'm not," he assured quickly, coming to sit down next to him. Tommy watched his every move carefully and shuddered slightly but didn't back away.

"You look like you are," he only said, pressing Henry tighter to his chest. Were it not for the teddy cow, he would have looked almost identical to Wilbur years before, unable to fall asleep without being reassured three times that absolutely no one was angry with him and he had done nothing wrong.

It wasn't a good memory in itself, it tasted rather bittersweet, but still the thought that all the effort had eventually paid off was reassuring.

He smiled as he shifted his hand so that he patted the pillow with his hand. Tommy understood instantly, curling up in a ball close to his palm.

"Wilbur said that once too, you know? This is just my face when I am very tired."

He wasn't sure if the boy believed him or was just tired, but he relaxed and yawned widely, letting him stroke his head.

"Okay..." he muttered sleepily, finally closing his eyes.

Phil waited a moment, running his fingers through his fair hair before finally standing up and as softly as he could slip out of the room, leaving the door ajar. But he stopped in the corridor, struck by a hunch, and, exactly as he had predicted, less than three minutes later the sheets rustled, and a sound flew through the room:

"Daaad...!"

No matter how much he loved the word in the mouths of any of his children - it was probably three in the morning, he was barely standing and he could already feel the bags forming under his eyes.

"You want to sleep with me tonight?" He asked as he stuck his head into the room. "You can say so if you want."

Tommy blushed slightly, looked down, but finally nodded.

"I do," he decided, to Phil's utter relief.

"Will you go on your own or...?" The boy extended his arms significantly towards him. "Okay. I see."

He understood a little less when, carrying his potential future outside the retirement home, he walked back into his bedroom and found one child wrapped in a duvet like a burrito and another sitting on the edge of the bed, swaying sleepily from side to side.

"Techno?" He nudged the boy a little, and he jerked his head up, alarmed. He immediately calmed down at the familiar surroundings and yawned widely without even trying to cover his mouth.

"Tommy screamed," he muttered. "I thought something happened."

Phil nodded, thinking the explanation quite reasonable. He nodded at the pile of duvets against the wall.

"Wilbur?"

Techno shrugged.

"Wilbur was already in my bed when I woke up. So I took him with me."

Phil wasn't sure there was a better way to sum up their family than with this picture.

"Of course he was," he sighed, letting Tommy settle in the center of the bed and going to the closet for a spare duvet, which he finally learned to keep handy. "And of course you did," he added a little tartly, trying to find a little room in the already tight tangle of limbs. He should buy a bigger mattress eventually. He sighed as Tommy immediately pressed against his side and Techno curled up on the other. In an hour or so he was going to move closer in his sleep anyway, but for now he had his pride and he was clinging to it. "If I had one more of you, we wouldn't have enough bed."

Techno hummed sleepily with the utmost indignation.

"No more kids."

"We can take Tubbo," Tommy offered, finally sounding like he was actually going to sleep. Phil just smirked.

"Absolutely not."

Sharing a bed with an infant, it quickly turned out, was a much more stressful experience than he might have expected. Phil wasn't quite sure if he wished they had at least somehow tried to fit the wooden cradle that Fundy had slept in in Wilbur's apartment into the trunk. On the one hand, it would spare him the constant stress of crushing the baby or pushing him to the floor by rolling from side to side. On the other - taking into account how often he woke up just to put his hand to the boy's chest and make sure he was breathing, by running to the other end of the room he would probably have completed an entire marathon on the first night.

Surprisingly, the child himself turned out to be surprisingly well-behaved. He woke up every hour on average to tell the world how much he disliked the concept of a healthy eight-hour rest, but a little attention and milk was enough to make him quiet and put to sleep again.

Which, of course, was still enough to make Phil look like a walking corpse in the morning, but it gave at least some hope that his sons were more fortunate about it.

Wilbur slept all evening, all night, and all morning. Phil had heard him twice at night tiptoeing into the bathroom, and the bottles of water he had carefully left at his door were gone, but he gave no sign of life other than that. Tommy had already eaten breakfast, complained that the crying of a baby was far too much around the house, and he was just finishing a long and unconvincing lecture about the fact that skipping the first lessons is actually healthy, when bare feet clicked on the steps of the stairs. Wilbur appeared in the kitchen - still pale and disheveled, and badly in need of a bath, but a step away from immediate death.

"Good mornig..." he muttered, staring at the floor and swaying on his heels just in front of the threshold, as if he wasn't sure he could cross the invisible line.

Phil wasn't quite sure if it was a matter of bad mood (because unfortunately, regardless of how many years passed, his sons still had bad days, going back to old habits) or if he was actually afraid of not being welcome. Regardless of the reason, or that it wasn't such an unfounded fear this time, Phil wouldn't forgive himself if he didn't change it right away.

"Want some eggs?" He asked, though he was absolutely sure that with his current energy level, he shouldn't be in control of any hot tool.

Wilbur glanced at him as he examined the ground, and seemed to relax a bit as he nodded and finally dragged himself to his seat at the table.

Tommy immediately used it to nudge his knee with his foot.

"Are you really having a baby with Sally?" He asked, because, apparently, Fundy hadn't yet proven hard enough that he was very alive, very real, and had a damn strong diaphragm.

Wilbur grimaced and pressed his back against the back of the chair.

"I don't want to talk about her," he grunted, which, of course, had the opposite effect.

"Why?"

"Because I don't feel like it."

"Why?"

Wilbur scowled at him, pursing his lips.

"Because fuck off."

Tommy made absolutely no move to it, seeming to be drawing energy from the thickening atmosphere.

"Whyyyy?" He swayed in his chair and almost ended with a broken skull when Wilbur suddenly kicked him under the table hard enough for him to hold on to the tabletop at the last

moment.

"Because you're a stupid child, and this's a topic for adults."

Tommy blushed in an instant, puffed up his cheeks, and slammed the chair's front legs with a bang against the dance floor.

"I'm not a child!" He was indignant, as if he had just been hit in the face by the worst possible insult. "Dad!" He turned to the stove, looking for allies. "Dad, he's calling me names! And he's stupid and stinks!"

Phil, in a way, could agree. With everything except the first sentence, of course.

"Boys, that's enough," he admonished, turning the eggs in the pan, making sure he cooked them enough. A lot of things could have changed, but his boy's taste buds were still doing a terrible job. "Tommy, leave your brother. Wilbur." He glanced over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "Take a bath after breakfast, okay?"

Wilbur blushed and looked away. Tommy immediately took a moment of triumph to stick his tongue out at him. Wilbur frowned and gave him the middle finger. Tommy returned the gesture. Wilbur grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm. Tommy snapped his teeth millimeters from his hand.

Phil began to seriously consider whether he would be able to kill himself by putting his head in the oven, if it was electric and there was no gas in it.

They ate in silence, the kind of awkward one that spread to absolutely everyone except Tommy. It was hard to judge if the boy didn't feel how tense the atmosphere was, was trying to loosen it, or if he just didn't care about anything but his own well-being, but he seemed suspiciously excited. No matter how many times he said how much he didn't miss his brothers at all, and how much he was glad to have the house to himself, he was always the first to run to his laptop when Techno video-called from the dorm, and you could see he was having a hard time when Wilbur stopped talking to them. Not surprisingly, now that the opportunity had finally come, he would look up from his plate again and again, as if making sure his brother was still sitting directly opposite, and occasionally nudging him lightly under the table with his foot. Not once did he get any reaction, and after a few minutes even his enthusiasm faded significantly and he grumbled more and more with each passing moment.

"I'm going to Tubbo's after school," he finally announced, just as Phil was about to remind him that if he didn't leave soon, he would miss the bus. It wasn't a question in any way, it was more of a *fait accompli*, but at the moment everyone had more problems on their mind than his moods.

"All right." Phil just nodded. "If his parents are-"

"I won't be back for the night."

He froze with his hand halfway to his mouth, then dropped his sandwich down on the plate.

"What do you mean you won't?" He looked at his child, expecting some development, but only lived to see a shrug. "You have school tomorrow."

Tommy winced at the reminder.

"And?" He snorted, in a tone that Phil absolutely hated, and each time he had to hold back very hard not to snap at the boy just for using it, let alone the content.

He held his air for a moment to stop himself.

"I'd prefer you to not stay at your friends in the middle of the week," he said instead, calmly and following broad logic. Which, of course, only made Tommy even more indignant.

"But that's not fair!" He pouted, looking at his brother expectantly, and when he didn't come to his aid, he immediately changed his strategy and pointed accusingly at him. "Wilbur could make a baby, and I can't even go to Tubbo's?"

Wilbur looked as if he wanted to jump over the table and twist his neck with his own hands. Phil almost wanted to let him do that.

"You can go to Tubbo's. But you have to be back by eight." He tried again and in a way had minimal success, because Tommy had jumped off his chair, but made no attempt to argue any further. "And wash your plate, please."

Tommy waved his hands in anger.

"But Wilbur-!" He began, but paused, turned to the door, and widened his eyes, jumping back.

Phil leaned over the table to see what had surprised him so much, and almost dropped his sandwich himself when he saw his oldest child standing in the doorway, bag slung over his shoulder, hands in pockets, and a very serious expression.

"Your plate." Was the first thing Techno said, staring directly at his younger brother from beneath raised eyebrows. "To the sink, now."

Tommy opened his mouth to protest, but quickly changed his mind, pressed his lips together, grasped the plate, and turned on his heel.

"It's not fair," he muttered, turning the water on with such a flourish that he splashed his sweatshirt in the process.

Techno shrugged, carefully watching his every move.

"Life is not fair," he said, leaning his shoulder against the frame.

Tommy grunted under his breath, but the rush of the water made him hard to understand. But the look he gave his brother, after he had put the plate on the dryer as loud as possible, almost shouted a lot of very unpleasant things. It didn't make the slightest impression on Techno.

"I'll come pick you up after school," he just said, and the mute 'you better wait for me there' came out strong enough that Tommy didn't even try to protest. He just grunted, puffed his cheeks, and wordlessly pushed past his brother, stamping his foot furiously through the living room. But he didn't shake off the hand Techno ruffled through his hair.

As soon as the front door slammed shut, there was complete silence in the house. Phil was still holding the nibbled sandwich, not sure what to do with it. Wilbur fidgeted in his chair and looked like a fox cornered in the woods by a pack of dogs. Techno, by contrast, seemed to be in a pretty good mood.

"Good morning." He set his bag on the ground and looked around the kitchen, spreading his hands in anticipation. "I would like to see the baby."

Eventually it dawned on Phil that he probably looked a little funny sitting still with a silly face, so he hurriedly put his sandwich back on his plate and stood up, arms outstretched in which Techno allowed himself to be closed without even a hint of protest.

"As I thought," he sighed dramatically, resting his head on his father's shoulder. He had to slouch a bit, because although he never caught up with Wilbur, they were both indecently tall, and Tommy was very likely to follow in their footsteps. "You can't get along without me. It's enough for me to disappear for a few months and it's a total mess."

Phil had neither the capacity, nor the strength, let alone arguments, to argue with him about it. Instead, he stepped back, his hands still on his son's shoulders, and surveyed him closely, making sure he was alive and well. He saw him regularly, but he had just found his second, apparently equally adult and reportedly equally well-doing child, in a state of being below all criticism. He needed concrete evidence that at least in one case he had not suffered a complete educational failure.

To his satisfaction, Techno hasn't changed a bit since Phil released him into the big world. His hair was a little longer, the shadows under his eyes a little deeper, and he looked like he spent more nights reading books than he did in bed, and passionately avoided the sun, but apart from the usual side effects of studying, everything seemed fine.

"You didn't say you were coming," Phil said, trying to sound a little reproach, but it was as hard for him to hide the tenderness in his voice as to keep from brushing a strand of hair behind his son's ear.

Techno shrugged and, as if reading his mind, smiled to himself.

"Well, I couldn't miss such a show," he snorted, just as affected by the seriousness of the situation as before. Then, with exactly the same non-existent seriousness, he turned to Wilbur and raised his eyebrows. "Hi, moron."

Wilbur, squeezed into his chair so far in complete shock, blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, tried again, and suddenly made the saddest, most heart-touching expression Phil had ever seen in him.

"Techno..." he sniffed, blinking back the tears, which was to no avail, because as soon as his brother reached out for him, he immediately jumped up and practically threw himself at him, crying loudly.

It was hard to judge whether Techno was surprised by this or not. He certainly hadn't expected such a violent reaction, for he swayed, took two steps back to balance, and froze for a moment, twisting his neck so his dark hair wouldn't tickle his nose.

"Uh..." he gasped, slightly awkwardly lifting his hands up, glancing at one hand at a time before finally placing them on his brother's head and back, with such caution as if he was disarming a ticking bomb. Under different circumstances, Phil would have found it damn funny. "Well, okay, if you have to..."

Wilbur obviously had to, because when he felt the physical support, he immediately clenched his arms even tighter.

"I fucked up," he sobbed between one shallow breath and the other.

Techno nodded, completely unfazed.

"I know."

"It's really *bad*."

"I know," he repeated, then sniffed himself, tilted his head a little closer to his brother's hair, sniffed him again and winced, immediately regretting it very much. "Gods, you stink. Have you bathed at least once this month?"

Wilbur, as was easy to predict, started to cry even more. So much so that it almost drowned out the baby cry coming from above. It took Phil a good few seconds to catch the desperate screams and a few more to switch from 'some baby's crying' to ' *my* baby's crying' and react in any way.

"I'll go to him," he said, seeing Wilbur most likely not registering anything at the moment that was not going on in his own head. Instinctively, he reached out to pat him on the back, but hesitated and changed his mind at the last moment, placing his hand on Techno's shoulder instead. "Eat breakfast. Both of you."

Techno just glared a bit at him.

"If he gives me a chance," he muttered in a tone that showed that he somehow didn't believe it. "Hey." He stabbed his brother on the cheek with his finger. "Hey, come on... You know that I'm bad at this..."

Wilbur's only response was, judging by the sound, to wipe his nose on Techno's t-shirt. Phil preferred not to wait to see what would happen to him if that theory turned out to be true.

The boys didn't show up for the rest of the morning. Phil could hear their hushed voices as he passed Techno's room, in the few rare moments of peace Fundy had kindly allowed him, but no matter how tempting the idea was to pause at the door and listen in, he forced himself to quicken his pace. If he has learned something over the years of parenting, it's the very unpleasant consequences of hearing something that was never meant for him. It didn't make the thought that his sons apparently still trust each other much more than him even a little less harsh, but he still preferred it rather than watching them stuff everything inside and try to solve any problems on their own.

Wilbur didn't start to appear in his bedroom until late afternoon, his eyes still red from crying, pale and in exactly the same clothes as before. He would stand in the doorway every time Fundy made even the slightest whimper, but always stopped when he saw that the boy was not getting hurt. He watched him for several more seconds to gain confidence, then backed away without saying a word, closing the door behind him. Phil wasn't sure if he was more pleased that he had clearly been deemed a worthy replacement, or if he was worried about the stubbornness with which his own child kept avoiding a shower.

"We have to go shopping," he said, tossing the baby in his arms. Wilbur, already with his hand on the doorknob, ready to step back into the corridor, froze immediately, like an animal at gunpoint. "Milk is slowly running out. And I don't really have anything to wash his clothes with, I don't want him to be allergic in any way." He made a face at the baby, trying to amuse him a bit, and was rewarded with a tiny fist slapped right on the nose. Apparently he was not a good comedian. "Do you want to go alone or would you prefer me to go with you?"

He looked up when he didn't get an answer right away, just in time to see Wilbur move from foot to foot, stressed even more than before, if possible, hand still clenched on the doorknob and staring at the floor.

"I... I don't have much money, right now..." he confessed, his voice low, trembling and so overloaded with shame that Phil himself winced, feeling him almost physically. Then he winced even more as he realized what response his child was expecting. If he had suspected until now that everything he had tried to hammer into his son's head had magically evaporated somewhere along the way, now he was more than sure.

"I didn't ask that," he said dryly, because no matter how hard he tried to understand, he still felt offended. But then he took a deep breath and forced himself to find the last remnants of peace and patience. "Okay, let's do this. I'm going to pick up Tommy from school and we'll drive to the store along the way. I can't promise you that I won't buy something 'boring'," he added, in a lousy attempt to relax the atmosphere, "but I'll try to appeal to your taste. What do you think?"

Wilbur didn't seem to want any jokes. Rather, he only dreams of falling underground.

"I'll try to borrow a little from Schlatt afterwards," he muttered, because apparently only his ass stubbornness survived unscathed in all the fuss.

Fundy hummed, shifting restlessly, kicking his legs tightly wrapped in the blanket. Phil used that as an excuse not to look at his son for a moment, trying to control his own emotions.

"Wilbur," he finally began, feeling the words burn his throat as some kind of punishment for missing the moment when they were even needed. "I'm not asking for money. Not now, not later," he assured him, hoping he would never have to repeat it again. And then he gave his kid one more careful look, from disheveled hair to dirty socks, and frowned. "When was the last time you ate?"

Wilbur flinched slightly, jerking his head up immediately.

"This morning," he replied almost fearfully, making the exact face Phil hated so damn much. As if he expected to hear any minute that the food was never intended for him, and he wouldn't see it again anytime soon.

Phil decided to pretend he didn't see it at all, and it didn't take away the few years of his already short life.

"But earlier."

Wilbur must have realized at last that the conversation was going in a different direction because he relaxed his shoulders.

"I don't remember exactly," he finally admitted, after several attempts to pick the answer off the floor. "I didn't have time."

Ten years ago, when Phil saw his baby for the first time in his life, perhaps he would have accepted such an explanation. Once, when he still wanted to delude himself that no one could deliberately hurt an innocent child, especially so trusting and thirsty for even a little warmth. But he had a lot of time to mature and come to terms with the fact that the world was not and will never be perfect, and that pretending only made the problem worse.

He looked down at the sleeping infant and carefully put him on the bed, covering him thoroughly with the blanket and smoothing the red hair gently. Only then did he sit down himself and pat the mattress beside him, but Wilbur didn't even take a step towards him. He was still clinging to the doorknob, and Phil began to seriously consider whether he was planning to use the door as a shield or just trying to stop himself from escaping.

"You didn't have time, didn't have money, or just didn't think you deserved it?" He asked, trying not to make it sound like an accusation. Even if, deep down, he was angry and had a great desire to remind his son of a few things. It could wait, at least until Wilbur would stop looking like he was about to pass out with nerves.

"I guess a bit of everything..." he admitted, which was not a bit surprising, but somehow Phil felt disappointed anyway. Before he could think about what to do with it, Wilbur suddenly blurted out, "I've stopped going to therapy."

There was complete silence in the room for a moment, as if even Fundy sensed the change in atmosphere and held his breath for a moment. Phil rested his elbows on his knees, stopping at the last moment from hiding his face in his hands and letting himself slowly sink deeper and deeper into self-torment.

"When?" He asked instead, because either of the two must have been acting a little bit mature.

"At... at the beginning of the year." Wilbur rocked on his heels, finally releasing the doorknob, only to wrap his arms around himself, contracting himself. "I needed to save some money because I didn't know if Sally would want to... You know."

Phil knew. He knew, he understood, and he tried not to judge decisions made out of sheer desperation. But especially the latter was hard for him, because he was the one fucking paying for his son's therapy. Yes, Wilbur insisted on doing it himself, but 'himself' in his case meant exactly the same as in the case of a child buying sweets with pocket money from his parents. Even after he found a job and insisted that he could pay for everything, Phil always wanted to be sure that he wouldn't be short on that one particular thing. He wanted to sleep soundly, knowing his sons had everything they needed, and it had never even occurred to him that he might be so perfidiously used and lied to. And it wasn't about the money itself, but about the heavily abused trust and the thought that, apparently, he had never known his child as well as he had thought.

Wilbur, as if sensing all these emotions, instantly paled even more.

"Puffy... Puffy doesn't like Sally," he said, as if he really believed it was a meaningful and valuable explanation. "I mean, she never said that, but she asked more and more questions and it got harder and harder to..."

He paused, searching for the right words, and he looked more and more distraught with each passing second, so much so that pity finally took over and Phil broke, temporarily pushing his anger aside.

"Was it harder and harder to speak honestly and say 'good things' at the same time?" He suggested, and Wilbur, as anticipated, immediately opened his mouth to deny it. But he closed it immediately, looked at his still peacefully sleeping baby, then down, down at his hands, clasped so tightly around his shoulders, they were likely to be bruised, and sniffed loudly, letting the first tears run down his cheeks.

"I really loved her, dad," he sobbed, hastily wiping his face with his sleeve. "I really... so much..."

Phil was sure that someday he would be lost because he couldn't be angry with his children for long. Moreover, he was convinced that a large part of their problems was due to the fact that he wasn't good at being strict and that he didn't react more severely, didn't rebuke a little more often, didn't hold a grudge a little longer. And, apparently, he couldn't learn from his mistakes either, for one brief moment was enough for him to get up and stretch out his arms, letting his son cuddle against him so tightly as if he would never get the opportunity again.

"I know," he sighed, stroking his back. "I know. But you'll love many more times in your life. And I will never forgive myself if I lose you."

Wilbur was shaking all over, trying to stifle a cry, but it didn't help much.

"I'm so sorry," he sobbed, between one shallow breath and the next. "So, so sorry..."

"I know," he repeated, this time trying to put a little more force into it. "But listen to me very carefully, okay? Do you know why I started going to therapy?"

Wilbur sniffed, still buried in his shoulder.

"Because no one normal could handle me and Techno at once?"

Phil put a lot of effort into not smiling.

"Because I realized that I wouldn't be able to help you, unless I could deal with my own problems. You have a right to have worse times, Wilbur," he assured, running his fingers through his dark hair. "You have the right not to deal with something, and you have an absolute right not to be perfect and make mistakes. But you are no longer responsible only for yourself." He grabbed his son by the shoulders, gently but firmly pushing him away from him so that he could look him straight in the eye. "And you owe it to your child to work on yourself and do whatever you can so that he never feels any of these things. Your feelings are important, they are so damn important to all of us. But your son shouldn't grow up worrying about you. It's not his role."

Wilbur's beard was still trembling, but as he looked to the side, straight at Fundy, a hint of determination appeared in his eyes.

"I know. It's just..." He took a deep breath to calm himself down a bit. "It was much easier when you were still there and kept saying that it wasn't true. What I think then."

Phil put a hand on his cheek, waiting a moment for him to meet his eyes again.

"I'm still here," he said with the confidence he had, because no matter how angry and disappointed he was, he would never be able to leave his children without help. Even if they deserved a little bit of it at times, as part of a life lesson.

Wilbur seemed to want to say something else, but before he could compose himself, Fundy opened his eyes and, very dissatisfied with the lack of his incessant attention, whimpered loudly, waving his hands in the air.

"Oh-o." Phil smiled slightly as he watched his son jump to bed immediately. "So clingy. Have you ever tried to leave him for more than two seconds?"

Wilbur shook his head, already tossing the boy in his arms.

"The neighbors were starting to complain," he replied, which was most likely not a joke, and only reassured Phil that neither his son nor his grandson would return to their previous apartment any time soon. Well, unless to clean up and pack the rest of their things. Other than

that, they were to stay where they were safe, well fed, and where he could keep an eye on them.

Chapter End Notes

Tommy, looking at Techno: You're the only bitch in the house that I ever respected.

Also, just to make things clear: Sally was a bitch, but she wasn't in any way abusive. Wilbur wasn't manipulated, he was just naïve and in love (and kinda stupid).

Author's note

I already wrote it once, but for all readers who aren't in my discord I'm gonna write it here too.

I'm not going to stop writing my fic or fics about DSMP in general. I'll need a bit of time to feel comfortable with it, so there won't be any update in this week, but I don't doubt I'll be back. I didn't know Technoblade and I don't know what would he want. But I know for sure, that I would be so pissed and offended if people just stop writing, drawing or making an content about my OC just because I fucking died.

Techno was one of the people that made this community, in which I felt safe for past two years, that gave me hope and made me improve. I think it's a honor for us to keep his legacy in any way.

But I also understand if some of you feels different and that's okay. It's okay if you don't want to read fics in general or specifically my fic anymore. Please do what feels best for you, take care of yourself and stay safe.

It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be confused. It's okay to take your time to process everything. Don't force yourself to anything. Your feelings are real and valid.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone, here's a new chapter. I made it with @Katricia help! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy, to put it mildly, wasn't thrilled to see Phil outside the school. At first, when he spotted the car, he immediately jumped towards it, almost completely ignoring Ranboo waving goodbye, but as soon as he noticed who was behind the wheel, he stopped abruptly, and Phil could swear that for a moment he was seriously considering running away, pretending to be blind. But in the end he moved, shuffling as slowly as he could, threw his backpack into the backseat, and climbed into the front seat himself, slamming the door in the process.

"Techno promised," he grunted, crossing his arms and sinking back into the seat.

It was on the tip of Phil's tongue to say that it actually had been more of a threat than a promise, but he refrained, seeing Tommy's already sullen expression.

"He's a little busy right now. Wilbur won't even let him go to the bathroom," he joked, having absolutely no qualms about shoving his son right under the train of teenage huffs. He was of the opinion that he had a sacred right to do so, forever and ever, amen. "And I need you for shopping. We have to pick some things for Fundy, and *some* people think my taste is... not good enough."

Tommy glared at him, clearly considering whether being able to throw anything he wanted into the cart would be enough to bribe and appease him. As always - it was enough, and he relaxed his shoulders, smiling to himself.

"It's because you're old," he said ruthlessly, but Phil, even if he wanted to, couldn't blame him. At the moment, with the prospect of getting supplies for his first grandson, he didn't feel particularly young.

Going shopping with any of the boys was always a bit like fighting the element. Phil had watched a documentary about hurricane hunters once, and since then he has been unable to think of himself other than as one of the lunatics voluntarily pushing themselves into the center of a storm for the greater good. In his case, the greater good came down to a full refrigerator and a cupboard stuffed with boxes of cereal, but it didn't sound so dramatic and didn't reflect the level of adrenaline when one of the children suddenly disappeared from his range, and from somewhere behind the shelves screams began to be heard.

Devoid of the brothers' destructive influence, Tommy was surprisingly calm, although not apathetic. He kept throwing random items into the basket without asking, but he didn't run

between the shelves, he didn't scream every time he saw something interesting, he didn't even organize a cart race. It was a change that was undoubtedly a big, quieter one, but Phil was beginning to doubt whether it was for the better.

"You think this will be good?" he asked, trying to enliven the boy a little, but Tommy barely glanced at the blue wooden bed Phil was holding up.

"I guess," he grunted, rocking on his heels, hunched in his own way, hands in pockets. "I don't know, it's not *my* baby."

Phil grimaced, partly reproachfully, partly because he saw the price of a single blanket. He began to seriously suspect that the slogan 'for baby' was identical to 'for a wedding' and it automatically overstated the value of absolutely everything, especially that which was never of value.

"That would be my last straw," he muttered under his breath, achingly putting a few more items in the basket, and when he turned to ask for help with finding the rest of the list, Tommy was nowhere in sight.

He was found a good twenty minutes later, crouched in an aisle with toys that he had been avoiding lately, because, as he repeatedly and loudly recalled, he was no longer a child. Almost a grown up! And maybe in fact he looked less and less like that little boy who was always hungry for attention and couldn't be run away from. But when he was sat on the floor with a large teddy fox in his outstretched hands, neither age nor height could make Phil stop seeing that child in him.

"Do you see anything interesting?" He asked, stepping up to the boy from behind and taking him by surprise, which made him jump, springing to his feet, and hastily tucking the toy behind his back.

"It's not for me!" He protested immediately, still pretending his hands were completely empty.

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"Relax. It's okay if it was for you," he assured, holding out his hand. Tommy hesitated, but finally reluctantly handed it back to him, flushing as if he had just been caught illegally smuggling. Admittedly, the fox would be almost worth it, fluffy, soft and as orange as possible. "For Fundy?"

Tommy nodded, shuffling the soles of his boots.

"He should choose himself... But I guess it won't matter to him what he drools onr," he said, with which it would be difficult to argue, although it certainly could be put in a slightly nicer way. "And it's like a tradition..."

Phil looked at the stuffed animal again, carefully avoiding the price tag, and raised an eyebrow.

"Is it because he's ginger?"

"Well, he is!" The boy said indignantly, as if someone were trying to convince him of the opposite. "Totally ginger!"

It was a bit hard to argue with this fact.

"You won't let him forget about it, right?" He asked with a pale shadow of hope that faded as soon as Tommy grinned, as only small gremlins can.

"Never."

Phil sighed, mentally getting ready for a lot of crying in the future and arguing about who's calling whom names and who's trying to sell who to the zoo. He just had great hope that Tommy wouldn't try to rip off all of his brothers' stupid jokes on his nephew, especially those about finding kids in the dumpster. On the other hand, with any luck, Fundy would inherit at least some of Wilbur's character, so there was a good chance he wouldn't be so naively believing everything he heard. To this day, he remembered his youngest child running over to him crying, for a good few minutes unable to utter a word through his tears and hiccups.

"Because Wilbur said I was adopted!" He sobbed finally, after he wiped his nose on his sleeve three times and almost coughed out his lungs twice.

Phil, waiting for some great tragedy, ready to immediately call the ambulance, the police and, just to be sure, the fire department, froze for a moment, withdrew his hands from the child's shoulders and looked at him carefully, trying to determine if he had just fallen victim to some silly joke. But none of his children were that good of an actor, not even Wilbur. Although the latter actually could cry on command and foolishly boasted about this trick, instead of keeping the knowledge to himself.

"Tommy, sunshine." He closed his eyes for a moment, collecting whatever patience he had left. He could have sworn he was out of stock for three lifetimes ahead. "I don't want to worry you, but you *are* indeed adopted. And you *know it* perfectly well."

Tommy, seven years old, in theory a fully functional thinking creature, immediately stopped crying and stared into space, analyzing the facts.

"Ah." He only replied, sniffing again, but more for the pleasure of smearing his T-shirt. "Yeah," he admitted cheerfully, as if nothing had happened. Then he puffed his cheeks and crossed his arms over his chest, casting an angry glare at the door. "But Wilbur said it like I didn't know!"

Sometimes Phil wasn't sure if he was more afraid for his children, or of them.

After much thought, he really hoped Fundy would be at least a little more normal than all the other kids raised in their house.

To his great relief, Tommy brightened up a bit when the teddy fox actually landed in the cart. Admittedly, his help mainly came down to pointing out to his father that he was old and

completely unfamiliar with fashion, but over the years Phil had gotten used to the taunts and didn't take them more personally. Although Techno could really stop putting exactly as many candles on his cake as he was turning each year. Unfortunately, since all that was good apparently had to come to an end as soon as they finished loading their groceries into the trunk and drove out of the parking lot, Tommy quieted again, lost in thought, the fox on his knees and his legs resting on the dashboard. Under normal circumstances, Phil would lecture him on how many places his calves would fold in the event of an accident, but temporarily somehow he couldn't summon the energy to rebuke him for anything. He had a hard time, even before the crying baby appeared in their house, he didn't need any more excuses to be offended and to confirm that the whole world is evil, mean and no one understands him. Instead, Phil let him remain silent and made no further attempt to get him to talk.

So he was all the more surprised when Tommy spoke first, reaching for the radio to turn down the music.

"Are you going to take care of him now?" He asked and, as if to be precise, nodded at the stuffed animal in his arms. "Of Fundy."

Phil didn't answer right away, taking advantage of the fact that they had just moved onto a slightly busier street and he could pretend to be focused on driving. But he couldn't avoid the question forever, even if he really didn't know the answer, neither good nor bad, much less honest.

"He's Wilbur's child," he said finally, and he had no idea whether it was a denial or confirmation.

For Tommy, which was easy to predict, it was absolutely not enough.

"Well, yeah. But Wilbur is..." He grimaced slightly. "You know. Himself. I wouldn't give him a baby."

Phil, once again that day, found he somehow didn't have much motivation to protect his older child. Not when he still had a lot of raw anger and disappointment left in him.

"Trust me, I didn't want him to become a father either," he muttered, but since fate was really damn funny, they were at a red light and he could no longer pretend. He released the steering wheel, tilting his head back against the backrest. "I don't know what will happen now," he confessed openly. "Probably everything will change a little."

Tommy hummed understandingly, but the way he began poking his finger at the tufted ear didn't mean that he was mature enough to understand. Phil had seen the same expression once before, that pout masking fear and uncertainty. He completely ignored it at the time, busy with preparing for the arrival of a new family member at their home. He wasn't planning on making that mistake a second time.

"Tommy?" He put a hand on the boy's shoulder, squeezing it lightly. "What's happening?"

He was surprised when, instead of grunting "Nothing", the boy swallowed, hesitated and pressed the fox a little harder to his chest.

"The last time things changed, you decided you didn't want me anymore," he muttered into the orange fur. Phil had an expression that he might as well have shouted it in his face, and that wouldn't make much difference.

To make matters worse, the light had already changed, the drivers behind him began to express their impatience loudly and with a heavy heart he had to move away from his son and focus at least part of his attention on not killing them on the straight road. He found the strength to speak only after they had left the intersection. Even then, he felt dumb about how faint his voice sounded.

"Is that how you remember it?"

It's not like they've never talked about it before. Phil really tried his best to make Tommy understand everything that happened, so that he would know that none of it was his fault, that sometimes things just get out of hand and people make mistakes that they later regret. He was sure the boy understood as much as a six-year-old would, especially one that forgives way too much way too easily. Perhaps it was foolish to assume that if he still had any questions, he would come to Phil himself. That, since he didn't raise the topic for the next few years, it made no sense to force open wounds once healed. That if they never gave him a reason to feel unwanted and unloved again, the painful memories would eventually fade away. After all, he liked to joke about it a lot, especially since he noticed how embarrassed Techno was at the mere mention. Tommy could yell: "Yeah, sure, take everything from me! Lock me up in the basement right now!" very dramatically laying down on the couch, and immediately winning the argument over a console pad.

Phil really had reason to think that his trauma was no more than a family anecdote. Though, when he put it in those words now, it could actually have been very wishful thinking...

Tommy didn't move, still hiding most of his face in the fox's mouth.

"Well... No, not really. It's Techno who didn't want me, sort of." He shrugged, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. "But you gave me away. And if I hadn't come back, you probably wouldn't even be looking for me."

It was hard to judge whether there was more to this statement as an accusation or a desperate need for someone to deny and correct him. Phil was eager to be able to assure him that on the very first day he had understood how empty the house was without him, that it only took a few hours for the silence to become too overwhelming, that if he had not regained his baby back, he would have been dying piece by piece every day. All of this would be the most sincere truth. But Tommy was still right, and just knowing it hurt like hell.

He had no idea what else he could do to fix it somehow.

"Tommy... It was all very complicated then," he tried, his hands gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. These weren't good conditions for this talk, but he had a strong feeling that his son had opened up to him just once and wouldn't repeat it in the near future. "I really believed it was the right decision. I thought it would be best for all of us. I would regret it every day for the rest of my life." He took his eyes off the road for a moment to look to the side.

Tommy stared at him with his big eyes, the same ones he had years ago when he tried to understand why he had to pack his things. "But I was sure I was doing the right thing."

It was hard to judge if Tommy thought it was a good, or at least sufficient explanation. He was still clearly tense, most of his face obscured by orange fur, and then he turned his head towards the window and for a long moment didn't speak at all, pretending that he was very fascinated by the sight.

"So Fundy won't get my room?" He finally asked, so softly that if Phil hadn't been waiting for any sign, he might not have heard it.

"Of course not. That's not even possible."

Only then did the boy relax, lowering the stuffed animal onto his lap and turning to face him.

"See?" He lifted his chin high. "I'm better than Techno. I can ask about it normally, instead of making a big drama. And I could take the kid to the basement instead."

No matter how good the sign of the return of the teasing tone was, Phil still winced at the comparison.

"Very funny," he muttered, and then, because he didn't like to leave things unfinished, asked a little more seriously, "Why did you think about that anyway?"

The boy blinked innocently.

"About the basement?"

"Tommy..."

"Well, I don't know." He shrugged, but, contrary to his words, he puffed a little and looked away. "Because... If you have the opportunity and a replacement now... Then why not."

Phil didn't understand right away.

"I have opportu-", he began, but paused until he straightened up in shock. "Tommy." Despite his sincere intentions, he couldn't hide a bit of resentment. "I never- Is this about your mom?"

Tommy shrugged, posing far more indifferent than he really was.

"You said that."

Phil took a moment to cool down so as not to accidentally say something stupid that he would soon regret.

"She doesn't want you back. Sam didn't mention her trying to legally take you back."

The moment, apparently, was too short. And he knew it himself, even before Tommy grimaced, pushing himself away from him as far as the straps and the width of the seat would

allow.

"Wow," he snorted, reaching for the doorknob even before the car turned onto their driveway. "Thanks, good to know."

"I didn't mean-"

He pushed the door open and Phil braked so hard they both lashed them forward. This didn't prevent the boy from immediately untying himself from the belts.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

He slammed the door without waiting for any answer. The front door of the house slammed moments later, and then, though Phil could no longer hear it, certainly the one upstairs as well.

He tilted his head back, his face in his hands for a moment, but self-pity and anger continued to burst through him from the inside, and he finally found an outlet for it, hitting the steering wheel with all his might.

"Fuck," he muttered, alternately straightening and clenching his sore hand, but that in no way either fixed anything or gave him any hope of a quick improvement in the atmosphere at home.

He forced himself to turn off the engine, without even trying to deal with the unpacking of his purchases by himself. If his children liked to point out his age so much, he could use it against them once and play a sick old man. Besides, his back really hurt.

Techno was unlucky to be closest to him when he burst into the house looking for a victim.

To be precise, Techno was standing on the lowest step of the stairs, trying to shout over Wilbur and Tommy, who were jumping at each other's throats one floor above, shouting over the crying baby. It was hard to catch a single word in the general noise, not to talk about understanding what exactly was going on, but in fact, Phil didn't give a fuck for the moment. For a few seconds he stood in the corridor, letting himself sink deeper and deeper into the overwhelming chaos before he stepped back and, putting all his accumulated emotions into it, slammed the door so hard that he probably broke the latch in the process. For the moment, he didn't care. For the moment what mattered was the deaf silence that immediately fell in the whole house, broken only by a baby's cry somewhere in the bedroom.

He looked at his sons, one by one, equally shocked and scared, and as if nothing had happened, he took off his shoes by kicking them against the wall.

"Groceries." He tossed Techno the car keys, not bothering to explain. "Wilbur." He looked up, and the called boy curled his shoulders. "I think your baby is calling for you. Tommy." He hesitated, trying to find the strength to make any remark, but finally just shook his head. "Do your homework if you want to go to Tubbo's tomorrow."

He didn't wait to find out if any of them had any brilliant answers to offer. Before they could shake off the shock, he was already in the kitchen, with one jerk opening the door to the terrace and closing it no less vigorously behind him. The fresh air usually helped him think, especially when he felt like taking a deep breath and screaming until the rest of his throat was torn off. The only thing that held him back was the thought that he would scare his sons completely away, and even without it, they would all be fed up with his problems at once.

Techno came to him less than an hour later, just as his anger was over and he was slowly feeling remorse for getting carried away. He complained about Tommy exploding for no reason sometimes, but he wasn't much better himself, even though he was much older and in theory more mature.

"Hi." Techno walked over to the railing, leaning over it. When he was younger, he would sometimes compete with Wilbur over who would last longer by hanging upside down from it. They only stopped when they both got too big and started touching their heads against the landing. "I left the keys in the corridor, if you were looking for them. And I fixed the door handle."

Phil, his thoughts still elsewhere, looked at him blankly.

"It wasn't broken," he said, but his son's expression was enough to make him understand, and he grimaced in embarrassment. "Ah. Yeah. Sorry."

Techno shrugged.

"It's okay," he said, though they both knew no, it wasn't 'okay' at any level. "I mean... I haven't seen you so pissed off for a long time. But I'm not surprised. I'd be pissed too if I had to deal with us all at once. I can come another time," he assured, this time standing on his tiptoes and leaning over the railing as if he were still considering one little flip-flop. At best it would end up with a sizeable bruise, at worst - a concussion. "Seriously, you can say if it's too much now, I won't be offended or anything."

He seemed to be quite serious and honest, and for a moment Phil really considered whether to just agree. Immediately after that, as a natural course of events, he felt guilty and felt even worse. Great. Now he was not only an inept father, but also chasing the children out of their own home, even if only in theory. Quite great. It was getting more and more fun.

He shook his head, gesturing for his son to come closer, and as he sat down next to him, his legs dropped over the edge of the terrace, he immediately leaned forward, resting his head on his shoulder. At times he missed a time when, by doing something similar, he could knock his sons to the ground, all three at once. But it was undoubtedly nice to have a firm footing in them for a change, both literally and figuratively.

"I'm glad you're here," he said quite honestly, because although the presence of Techno brought in more chaos, he couldn't imagine that he was voluntarily giving it up. "It's just..." He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose to stop the slowly rising pain in his head for just a moment. "It all happened so suddenly and then Tommy..."

Techno immediately perked up, always ready to kick his brothers for any reason.

"What did he do this time?" He asked, in the exact tone he always did when he began to act like a policeman on duty. If Phil had the strength for any emotions, it probably would have amused him.

"It's not his fault," he just sighed, instantly bouncing off the thick wall of skepticism.

"Bullshit. Certainly his fault. I can kick him if you want."

"Techno."

"I'm serious." No one had any doubts about that. "You won't do anything to him, because you're, well, *you*. But *I* can."

Phil raised an eyebrow, lifting his head a little to get a better look at him. For some reason, the older Techno got, the stronger his protective instincts became towards his family. The whole family - unless someone really believed it was a pure coincidence that Tommy had just come home once with a black eye, only to announce with a broad smile the next day that all his bullies had, oddly enough, fallen down the stairs at the same time - though, undoubtedly, protecting Phil from all terrible teenager's talk back was all the more tempting as it included the opportunity to torment his brothers. Wilbur, as on many other issues, was Techno's soft point, but Tommy very often ended up slapped in the head or kicked under the table whenever he rolled his eyes or muttered a little too loudly his surely very eloquent retort. Phil tried to respond to anything that went beyond mere sibling scuffles, but Techno remained damn stubborn in his belief that he was destined to be Phil's private bodyguard.

"Because he thinks that he can do anything!" He insisted when he swung at his brother over the plate again and was immediately admonished that a few extra centimeters in height still didn't automatically give him the title of the second parent.

Phil, only drinking his first coffee of the day, took a moment to let the caffeine do its magic.

"He's no worse than you were his age, I assure you," he said, which was the honest truth. And if anyone had any doubts about it, he was ready to show in detail which child is responsible to what percentage for his future heart attack.

Techno grimaced, crossing his arms, probably not very eager for a substantive discussion.

"Ah, so the bar is on the floor now, I see," he snorted in a tone that apparently didn't bother him, as long as it came out of his own mouth. "And I wasn't so... so..." He looked at his brother and wrinkled his nose even more. "So deliberately annoying."

A very strong statement in the mouth of someone by whom the younger brother still refused to eat beef.

"I don't know." Phil took a sip of the cup, already feeling he needed a refill. "You blew up their country once, if I remember correctly. Pretty 'annoying' if you want my opinion."

Techno blew with indignation, only staring at him for a moment with such resentment as if he had just been stabbed in the very heart.

"Well, because they deserved it! And it wasn't even me, it was Wilbur!"

"Bullshit!" Tommy, acting first and thinking after (or not at all) as always, of course, had to remind of his existence so that the conflict wouldn't accidentally resolve itself in the most peaceful way possible. Phil was beginning to regret that he hadn't had a drop of alcohol in the house to discreetly season his coffee with it. "It was you, because you envied me that I could be the president, and you couldn't!"

Techno scowled at him.

"Aaah, so you remember that so well, but not that it was me who I found your Tubbo?"

"I found my Tubbo myself, fuck you!"

Phil wasn't quite sure how this discussion ended and ultimately who destroyed whom and who found what, because taking the opportunity that he had temporarily ceased to exist for his sons, he retired to the living room.

Apparently, neither the distance nor the charms of studying have weakened Techno's hard-handed reign. In a way, it was nice to know that some things hadn't changed at all.

"He's just at a difficult age right now."

Techno just rolled his eyes.

"Well, as for me, he was always difficult. To endure, at least," he huffed, and Phil had no heart to remind him that when Tommy shuffled around the house, feeling deeply out of touch with Wilbur and taking every missed call very personally, Techno was the first to talk to him until a late hour and assure him that their brother is just an unpredictable idiot, and there's no major philosophy behind it. Techno has never liked being 'soft', as he called being a perfectly normal, sensitive person. Which absolutely didn't change the fact that, especially with Tommy, he sometimes took on the consistency of cotton wool. "And you're too soft with him."

If Phil had gotten a pound every time he heard this phrase, he would have bought himself some decent earplugs long ago.

"I treat him exactly as I treated you," he repeated, a little automatically. And, most likely out of reflex, he got exactly the same reaction as usual.

"Exactly! And do you remember how it ended?" Techno scowled at him as if he were trying to refresh his memory and look thirteen again. Completely unsuccessfully. Nothing could fully capture that pout and pain of existence. "I'm not saying that I would be an angel if you were..." He made a vague gesture, probably not quite knowing what he was trying to convey with it "well, less yourself, but maybe you could have yelled a little bit of stupidity out of my head."

Phil had been wondering for some time if such remarks were more due to frustration and guilt still alive, or rather to regret and resentment that no one noticed in time how

psychologically stressful those few weeks had been for him seven years ago. He was slowly getting the idea that they would have to talk about it seriously. But maybe not necessarily now.

"I have the impression that you remember yourself as a teenager in a completely different way than I do."

Techno, expecting a slightly different answer, paused for a moment, staring into the garden.

"Maybe," he finally admitted reluctantly. "I'm sure I'm fucking a pain in the ass on both versions. But seriously, nothing will happen if you don't jump around him like that once."

Phil, who was already enjoying the change of subject to... whatever, sighed inwardly very, very hard. And then he sighed aloud, too, because if his kids had, damn it, insisted on tormenting him at all costs, they should see the consequences afterwards.

"Yhm. He'll definitely listen to me more if I yell at him." He snorted, fully aware that raising his voice to either of the boys was usually much more traumatic for himself than it was for them. Well, maybe not more. They shared the trauma equally and fairly.

Techno rolled his eyes.

"He's listening to me somehow. And I yell at him all the time," he reminded him, as if the last time he hadn't given that proof an hour ago. "And I have no problem with that."

There were a lot of logical arguments to explain this 'phenomenon', starting with the fact that being called a 'stink gremlin' by his older brother was an absolute everyday for Tommy, an element of dialogue, to which he answered in the same tone, and above all an empty phrase, for which had no deeper emotions, as everyone knew. An adults anger, in contrast, was far worse, and could easily bring up memories that Phil preferred to let lie as they were..

Techno knew all this, he must have known about it, because Phil still remembered the little boy who flinched at every sudden movement, then lifted his chin and reminded him that he was ready to hit him back at any moment.

"Because he was never afraid of you," he said, and he could tell at once that Techno understood, if only from the moment his muscles stiffened and his breath stopped in his chest.

"I wouldn't exaggerate with that 'never'," he snorted after a moment of silence, clearly trying to joke. "I was working to make him a little scared just in the right way. Besides," he added, much more seriously, "we were never afraid of you either."

Phil straightened up, staring up at him from under his raised eyebrows, really surprised this time.

"That's the next thing I remember a bit differently."

"No, really. Never- Not because-" Techno pursed his lips, this time giving himself a moment to choose the right words. "We were scared because we thought you were like everyone else."

But you weren't. It was never about you, not really. It's just... Lots of bad memories," he finished, shrugging his shoulders as if nothing had happened. "Hey." He nudged him lightly with his elbow, seeing that his speech had no effect. "Come on. How long has Tommy been with us? Seven years? Full of my suffering?" He grimaced dramatically, and this time Phil did indeed smile back a sluggish smile. "He knows you. He won't be suddenly afraid of you just because you tell him he's acting like a spoiled little shit. He'll be all sulky, most likely. But nothing else. And at least you will feel better."

There was a little too much logic to it for Phil to be able to completely ignore it. Some kind of truth that he had figured out some time before, but which he disavowed for fear of taking the risk. He would never forgive himself for hurting Tommy a second time, not when, apparently, the first time's footprints were still so fresh. On the other hand, sooner or later, they had to talk, because if he had already found out about something, it was that leaving the children alone with any doubts about their place and role in the family usually ends very, very badly.

He sighed as he rested his temple on his son's shoulder.

"You're just looking for an excuse to get your brother into trouble," he said, to lighten the mood a bit.

He didn't even have to look up to know that Techno was smiling.

"No, but it's a very nice addition."

"I don't doubt. What was that all about? That yelling before?"

"Tommy slammed the door and woke Fundy. Wilbur is like a walking time bomb, better not to tease him now."

Phil was on the tip of his tongue that a brawl on the stairs had never made any baby go back to sleep before, but he figured sound logic might not be the main driver of their actions at the time.

"I understand that you joined in just for entertainment."

Techno laughed, and this time Phil looked at him, just to see his face soften and his eyes warmer.

"I missed them," he confessed quietly, a little hesitantly, and with his usual embarrassment. Immediately he cleared his throat, as if no one would have thought that he had such moments of weakness a lot. "You know, how much you can shout at Dream? It's not the same."

Phil was ready to take his word for it and made no attempt to push him more. Especially as it was getting colder outside and it was getting harder and harder to ignore the unpleasant cramp in his stomach and the thought that dinner would not cook itself.

When some time later the other boys appeared downstairs (Techno personally went to get Tommy and almost carried him down the stairs, holding him by the neck like an unruly

kitten), they both seemed much calmer. Fundy must have fallen asleep again because Wilbur finally found a moment to change and even take a shower, judging from his still damp hair. Admittedly, he made up for the improvement in his appearance with the expression of an abused puppy, but he relaxed a bit and smiled at the bowl of stew on the table.

"For me?" He asked uncertainly, glancing from the table to his father.

Getting angry with him has always been the most difficult of the three, and Phil wasn't even surprised that despite his still smoldering anger, his heart instantly softened.

"For you," he nodded, ruffling his hair, judging with satisfaction that it didn't have the texture of a dirty floor cloth anymore.

Tommy wasn't half as happy to spend even a minute with his family. He sat down at the table, but probably more because of the fear that Techno was ready to put him on a chair by force and tie him to it. Which was very likely.

Under normal circumstances, Phil would have been at least a little annoyed and more than a little yearning to see this little boy making a big mess because he couldn't stop talking for a second to swallow. How and when exactly he was replaced by a grumpy teenager - he had no idea. But complaining had never changed anything, and it certainly hadn't set back the time and effects of puberty, and he was still too ashamed to reproach anyone.

"Tommy." He waited a moment for the boy to reluctantly pull away from turning his food over on his plate and actually look at him. "I'm sorry. I wasn't mad at you, I was..." He hesitated, but in the end he only sighed heavily. "I was angry with myself because I said something stupid."

Tommy shrugged, whipping the potatoes with a fork into a smooth mush with even more interest.

"It's okay," he muttered, sounding like the absolute opposite of 'okay' and actual forgiveness.

On the one hand, Phil really didn't want to press, he didn't want Tommy to feel compelled to accept an apology or elaborate on the subject more in front of his brothers. On the other hand, he was almost sure that by letting go, he would only confirm the boy in the belief that he didn't understand anything and didn't care for him at all.

"You sure?" He asked, feeling as if he were treading on very thin ice. In a minefield.

Tommy shrugged, slumping slightly lower in his chair.

"Yeah," he grunted, in exactly the same tone he'd been getting hit regularly for from Techno, but before anyone could swing a hand at him, he added, "It's not the first time someone told me that my mother doesn't want me. I've heard that before, you know?" He looked up, looking his father straight in the eye for the first time. "Mainly from her."

Phil couldn't help feeling that he had just been challenged. Nor did he have to take his eyes off his youngest son to feel the two older ones drilling a hole in his head with their eyes. He

tried hard to ignore the thought that he would at least have to try to explain it to them, or accept that he had just lost it in their eyes. He wasn't sure what was worse anymore.

"That's not what I meant," he said, trying very hard to sound firm and gentle at the same time. As a result, it turned out a bit too pleading, but apparently it was mostly good intentions that counted. "I'm sorry, I really am."

Tommy wrinkled his nose, still stubbornly working his mashed potatoes.

"Okay," he muttered finally, probably mostly because both brothers started poking him with their feet under the table, thinking they were very subtle and unnoticeable.

Phil decided that this was enough for the moment. Techno was of a completely different opinion.

"How about putting your heart into it, huh?" He snorted, this time stabbing the boy in the shoulder with a very obvious knife. Tommy squealed involuntarily and immediately blushed, giving his brother a murderous glare.

"Piss off," he snapped. The knife hit him again, so he tried to snatch it from Techno's hand, but all he got was a few seconds of scuffling before he was forced to accept defeat. Somehow it did help to loosen the atmosphere a bit, though, because when he slumped back on the chair back and scowled at his brother, he looked a lot less angry, but a little more hurt. "You didn't come to get me from school."

Techno put the knife back on the plate, but didn't move the chair an inch away.

"Plans changed a bit," he said indifferently, but Phil knew him too well to ignore the shadow of concern in his gaze. Nor was he foolish enough to believe that: "After dinner, I can take you back and forth if you like" was actually meant to be just a joke.

And Tommy shows no signs of falling for that either, for he straightened up and lifted his chin defiantly.

"Okay."

Techno raised his eyebrows, but the corners of his mouth twitched slightly in a smile.

"Okay," he confirmed, and they both went back to eating, this time with a little more enthusiasm.

Sometimes Phil really wondered how those same boys who couldn't understand the suggestion that the dishes wouldn't wash by themselves were able to play psychological games with each other that they only understood.

As if reading his mind, Techno shrugged, nodding at his brother with a shake of his head.

"Otherwise, he will be cranky till death."

If Tommy found this to be an insult, he chose to keep it to himself. Or maybe he didn't even hear it, too excited about the trip. In any case, he emptied his plate at express pace and spent the next ten minutes moaning, tugging his brother by the sleeve and pacing around the living room, waiting for Techno to graciously get up from the table. Phil could have bet that Techno'd picked up some more food just to tease the kid even more. Eventually, even he grew bored of lifting his fork to his mouth in slow motion, grabbed the keys from the hall locker, and they both disappeared outside the door, arguing at the outset whether or not Tommy could sit in the front.

The house grew much quieter without their scuffles, as Fundy, out of spite, decided to take a nap, and nothing could cover up the atmosphere at the table. Wilbur curled his shoulders, slouching over his plate, pondering every bite as if he had to remind himself over and over that he had the right to eat and that no one could forbid him to do so. Phil suspected that it was so, and he was no longer sure if he was more pleased that his son was still able to convince himself, or that he was worried that he was having such apparent difficulty again. For a moment he hesitated to comment on it, but he didn't want to embarrass him even more. Sometimes it was better to settle for a meager result than risk losing any progress. But he added two more times to his own plate, just to keep Wilbur from feeling rushed.

For some reason, whenever any of the kids felt guilty or really got into trouble, they always tried to compensate for it by washing the dishes. Wilbur might have been an adult, but the old habits didn't seem to die, because as soon as he finished eating, he sprang up to pick up the plates.

"I'll help," he said, in exactly the same desperate tone he always did, as if refusing to do so could mean the end of the world and banishment for life.

Phil preferred not to test it live, and while every one of his sons splashed the entire floor while washing up, he limited himself to wiping plates. He was just watching Wilbur destroy the pot using the wrong side of the sponge when the silence grew a little too loud even for his endurance.

"I called Puffy," he said, and, taking advantage of the surprise when Wilbur froze for a second, took the sponge from his hand, turned it over, and slid it back into its original position. The boy immediately squeezed it so tightly that the foam completely covered his fingers. "I made an appointment for you on Tuesday."

He expected Wilbur to protest, at least 'on principle'. That he will start to argue that he's an adult and how well he's able to handle his own affairs, or that he will accuse him of too much meddling. He had answers prepared for every conceivable possibility and promised himself not to get upset no matter how much some of them made him want to smack his child and potentially stick some brains into his head.

But Wilbur slowly lowered his hand and stared at the frothing water for a moment before swallowing loudly, if possible even more stressed than before.

"I can still go to her?" He asked, so softly that if Phil hadn't been so eagerly anticipating any reaction, he might have missed it. And maybe he would even prefer not to hear. Certainly, a momentary deafness would have a beneficial effect on his nerves.

"I don't think she would mind," he replied cautiously, studying his son carefully for any clues. "She was worried about you, in fact. She said that you canceled all your visits overnight and fell silent."

Wilbur had the decency to blush. There was only hope that he would have enough to apologize and explain everything to Puffy later.

"Well, yes," he admitted, tugging the sponge in his hand, not even paying attention to the abandoned pot. "But I meant if... You know. Will you still let me."

It was definitely more than unexpected, and it sent to hell a long list of possible responses. It took Phil a few seconds to make sure he did understand correctly before he even considered the answer.

"Why would I not let you?"

Wilbur shrugged, finally putting the sponge down and instead propping himself with both hands on the sink, staring at the bottom as if he saw anything interesting in it through the foaming water.

"You know..." He hesitated and shook his head. "I told you that I can't quite afford... anything at all, right now."

Phil sighed inwardly, on the one hand tired of repeating the same thing again, on the other hand happy that it was all about it. If only all the problems in their family could be solved so easily...

"I'm still not asking you for money," he assured him, but Wilbur just grimaced.

"Exactly. I thought..." He paused for a moment, and when he spoke again he sounded much less like a stressed adult and much more like a scared child. "I lied to you. And... And I stole from you, no matter how you look at it. I thought..." He wrapped his arms, completely oblivious to the foam on his hands. "I don't know. That you would say that since I wanted to be an adult, I have to deal with it myself now. Or that I missed a chance and now it's too late or something..."

Sometimes Phil wished someone had warned him in time that no one could stab a knife as deeply into the heart as your own child. Though he doubted anything could prepare him for such a blow.

"You thought I would forbid you to go to therapy as a punishment?" He made sure, with all his heart counting on denial. But his son couldn't just take pity on him, and instead nodded sadly. "Christ, Wilbur. I never- Why would I-"

Wilbur, if possible, had shrunk in himself even more.

"I don't know." He sniffed, quickly wiping him with the back of his hand. "I... I don't know anything anymore."

He looked so desperate, so defenseless and scared of everything that was going on in his life that it was difficult to suppress the urge to hug him, soothe him, and reassure him that everything was going to be all right. But Phil really had no idea if or when things would actually work out, and he couldn't bring himself to lie, even if it wouldn't hurt anyone this time. Maybe he still had a grudge deep in his heart. Maybe he was overwhelmed by the recent events himself, and it took time to figure it out and think carefully before actually starting to fix anything. Maybe he was just tired, too, and couldn't summon enough energy to try to fix all his problems at once.

Maybe they both needed some time.

"Go to bed. As long as Fundy is giving you a chance," he advised, placing a hand on his son's shoulder but not trying to get any closer. Wilbur didn't move from his place either, just looked down at his father's hand next to his, and for a moment he looked like he was going to cry before he gathered himself up and nodded. "If you want, you can leave him with me for a night."

Wilbur just shook his head, looked at the rest of the dishes in the sink one last time, and held out his hand as if to reach for his sponge again, but gave in halfway through the gesture and only backed toward the door.

"I can handle it," he said before he disappeared through the door.

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, before leaning over the sink, trying to focus only on the view outside the window.

* * *

The other boys returned a good two hours later, so they probably drove up and down the whole city without ever hitting the school. Tommy seemed so much happier, talking incessantly even as he took off his jacket and shoes, but upon seeing he Phil immediately puffed his cheeks, pursed his lips and ran up the stairs without a word. Techno, for a change, was silent, hanging his jacket on the hanger and even remembering to take the keys out of his pocket and put them on the table first.

"He's so damn spoiled," he said finally, when Phil raised his eyebrows at the McDonald's wrapper in his hand, but he didn't seem actually angry or even irritated. In fact, he looked exactly the same as he always did when he had to spend more than five minutes with his younger brother: as if he were having a lot more fun than he was willing to admit, so he planned to cover it up with complaints. "I knew it would be like that. I left for a while and he thinks he's allowed everything," he snorted, but then he turned serious and leaned over the railing of the stairs to make sure Tommy was definitely out of sight and out of earshot. "Hey." To be sure, he lowered his voice a little. "But anyway... I think you should talk to him."

Phil could really have ended the day without one more thing tormenting him during the night. Unfortunately, apparently it was not given to him, so he only showed his son the way to the kitchen. Out of two bad things, he preferred to pollute only one room with negative energy.

"Something happened?" He asked, quietly hoping that maybe, but maybe it was not what he suspected. Maybe someone is teasing Tommy again at school, and Techno has made an exceptional decision not to take matters into his own hands. Or maybe it's because a child his age shouldn't be overloaded with that much sugar at night. Or that he could stop looking for ways to bypass the parental block of the Internet. Or...

He didn't even have the strength to make any more excuses. It was easier to come to terms with destiny.

"He's mad at you," Techno said, as expected. "But, like, for real. More than 'because he told me to clean my room'." He sat down in the chair and pushed the other one aside, but Phil shook his head, resting his hips against the cupboard instead. He suspected that if he actually sat down, he might fall asleep immediately. "He didn't want to say what happened, only that you are 'a goddamn liar and you can't believe anything you say because first you let him choose and then you do it your way anyway'." He made double-quotes with his fingers almost apologetically, but Phil only winced slightly. He had heard it with his own ears, at least twice, and directly from the sender. "Did you two have a fight?"

He rubbed his hand over his cheek, closing his eyes for a moment.

"A little," he admitted, knowing full well that it only raised more questions. He really didn't have the strength to explain anything now. And I think he was a little afraid that no one would agree with him. "I tried to talk to him, but each time it only made it worse. But I'll try again."

As if he had any other choice.

Techno nodded and propped his chin in his hand as he hunched over the table. Apparently, the trip from college tired him more than he was ready to admit.

"He's angry with Wilbur, too."

Phil raised his eyebrows, not even trying to hide the slight mockery in his voice.

"Who isn't?"

"Yeah, but he's more concerned with feeling neglected. I quote: 'because he made a child and now he doesn't give a shit about me and he didn't even come to talk to me, so why did he come at all'. End of quote."

Either way, it sounded a lot like Tommy. And very much like something Phil didn't quite feel like messing about with. Whenever he tried to help and reconcile his children with each other, they usually ended up colluding against him, as if in some kind of sealing an alliance with a common new enemy. If there was anything worse than an offended Tommy, it would be Tommy with Wilbur admitting he was right.

"This is a matter between them," he said dryly.

Techno looked at him carefully.

Phil didn't look away.

Techno tilted his head, looking for a weak point.

Phil crossed his arms, leaning even more against the wall.

Techno looked away and sighed dramatically.

Phil capitulated.

"I'll try."

Sometimes he really understood why people stopped at just one child. Or at no child at all.

Chapter End Notes

Techno to Tommy: You remind me of younger me. I hate it.

They're going to talk soon, I promise! Phil can't stay mad forever.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sooo.... Is this chapter late? Yes, yes it is. But look, Techno with little Fundy! Look, look!

And I made it with @Katricia help! :D

Also, go check my sister's new story. It's really cute!
archiveofourown.org/works/40654491/chapters/101860689

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno had promised to stay for the weekend, and he must have regretted it a bit as he knelt on the floor of the living room on Friday morning, mumbling a curse, looking for the missing bolts in the box for the cradle. He couldn't quite complain though, since he had brought that fate upon himself by standing over Wilbur's head instructing him how to hold the screwdriver and why not the way he just did. Apparently, a few months of independence made him a specialist in absolutely every field, judging by the fact that shortly afterwards, he also gave advice on parenting and childcare with an equally serious face.

"Well, it's because you dressed him too warmly," he said, leaning against the doorframe while Wilbur paced the room, trying to convince Fundy that there really was no need to cry, everyone would listen to him anyway. "He's boiling. And you're holding him wrong, too. You're gonna rip his head off. Or he'll have a crooked spine, just like you, idiot."

Wilbur shot him a murderous look and pursed his lips, seemingly miraculously holding back a very indecent answer.

"The specialist is here," he snorted, but actually looked at his hands carefully, adjusting their alignment.

Techno clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Well, if someone was shaking me like that, I would be screaming too."

Wilbur quickened his pace a bit. If he planned to put all his anger into making a hole in the floor, they might soon have a shortcut to the living room.

"If I hit you right now, you won't even make a squeak," he growled, barely breaking through the incessant crying. "Since when have you been so smart?"

"I've always been smart." Techno lifted his chin, trying to look down at his brother despite the difference in height. "And I read a book anyway. About babies."

This time Wilbur stopped and actually looked at him, with a feeling that he was forgetting his malice.

"You've read the book," he repeated, going back to rocking his son, but with less conviction. "When?"

Techno shrugged.

"Yesterday. Unlike you, I can put letters together and it doesn't take forever."

Wilbur, for a moment actually considering losing his tone in name of respect for the written word, immediately changed his mind, stretching his arms out in front of him with the child still loudly demanding hell-knows-what.

"Oh yeah? Here you go. Calm him down yourself, if you're so damn smart."

Techno definitely didn't expect such a turn of events and at first he stepped back like he'd been burned. But then he must have remembered that he was the smartest and was afraid of nothing, and certainly not of his own nephew, no matter how tearful and snotty he was. So he spread his hands, although they were shaking a little, he sat down on the bed for safety, and he let Wilbur put a small bundle into them.

Perhaps Fundy was shocked to find his own father so eagerly handing him over to a stranger. Maybe he really didn't like being shaken, or he felt emotions better than everyone thought, and he liked the less confident, but much calmer embraces much better. Or maybe just like all the kids in their family, he was a mischievous little gremlin ready to spite everyone. Whatever the reason, he immediately stopped crying, staring at Techno with wide eyes. Techno looked at him no less intensely, the silence broken only by their uneven breathing. He stooped slightly to look at the baby more closely, until his hair slipped from his shoulder and fell directly onto Fundy's flushed, tear-wet face, patting Fundy right on the nose.

Wilbur twitched uneasily, ready to run to his son's rescue at any moment, but Fundy just grimaced, waved his hand, finally gripped pink strands tightly and shook them, suddenly smiling a broad, toothless smile, as if he had already forgotten that a moment ago, he had a lot to complain about.

Wilbur blinked, opened his mouth, and stood there for a moment, struck by the absolute injustice of the world.

"Really?" He finally grunted, as if the child could actually understand him.

Maybe Fundy could, because he shook the new toy once more with a short laugh to seal his betrayal.

Techno meanwhile, no less surprised, lightly nudged his little fist with his finger.

"Oh." He smiled, his gaze instantly gaining warmth and tenderness. "Oooh... Look, he prefers me." He shot his brother a victorious look, but then turned his full attention back to Fundy.

"He has a good taste. Certainly not from his parents." He made a face at the baby, welcoming another burst of laughter. "I bet he's smart too. Also not after you."

Wilbur scowled even more, making his face as if the whole world had colluded against him, but made no attempt to reproach him. He felt his first collision with children's ingratitude deeply, which Phil found, truthfully, almost as fun as it was satisfying. Indeed, Karma never lost her way, sometimes it just took a little longer.

Fundy lay there for another half hour, which was an extraordinary achievement by his standards. With each passing minute, he seemed more and more fascinated by the new adult, reacting with delight to absolutely anything, from silly expressions to being tossed in the air (Phil could sense from a distance how fast Wilbur's heart beats every time the baby was even a centimeter above stable ground). He liked Techno's hair the most, though, and most of the time he didn't let it out of his fist. Techno didn't seem to mind, though he winced at every strong pull. He only protested when Fundy decided to move on to the next stage and evaluate its taste as well.

"Hey, hey, no, don't do that." He held the little hand halfway, which was immediately met with a dissatisfied kicking and a short scream. "I know, I know, but it's dyed. I don't know if you can eat it." Fundy shouted again. The resistance has clearly weakened. "Uh, well... Tommy ate half a tube of paint once and somehow lived..."

Phil, who had been watching them fondly so far, straightened up, frowning.

"I'm sorry, Tommy did what?"

Nobody deigned to answer him. And certainly not Wilbur, who had taken the moment of calm and fell asleep in his chair, his head resting on the desk, his hand shielding his eyes from the light.

Techno, meanwhile, watched his hair become slimy on all sides, and he didn't seem a bit disturbed by the fact. Apparently some minor changes had just taken place in his private hierarchy, and the new family member was automatically hitting the top, with his absolute protection.

"He must be hungry," he said, for which there was absolutely no evidence other than the focus with which the baby was chewing on his pink strands, but Phil made a momentary decision to trust his newfound knowledge about newborns.

"I'll take him." He held out his hands, grinning broadly as Fundy reluctantly allowed himself to pass from hand to hand. Still, he was reaching out to Techno, grimacing and whining loudly in open protest. "Aha. I think we have a new favorite."

Techno straightened up, both proud and somewhat confused by the unexpected honor.

"He has a good taste," he repeated, moving a little closer so that the child could reach his hand, thereby sealing some mute pact known only to them.

Which, as it soon turned out, had its good and bad sides. Mainly because Techno clearly wanted to prove himself, and because there was no real threat at the moment, he was forced to create problems for himself. Phil found it quite amusing until it became obvious that, apparently, he himself had no authority whatsoever, that everything he did was wrong and needed to be tweaked at every step.

"Techno, for God's sake," he hissed, interrupting his lecture on how horribly he was holding the bottle. "I've fed three boys, and I'm going to feed a fourth one too."

Techno, not a bit convinced about that, just crossed his arms, staring down at him. Phil wanted to kick him and strip him of that privilege.

"Well, yeah, but we already knew how to use cutlery." He recalled what happened to be a lot of truth. "Well, except for Tommy, I mean," he added thoughtfully. And that was also quite right.

"I'll manage somehow."

"But he'll get colic."

"We'll get through it."

"But I can show you-"

"I can handle it," he said firmly, turning his back to his son. In some moments he began to understand why Wilbur might prefer to be quietly inhaling the toxic fumes in his apartment. He himself would very much like to take such a vacation.

Fundy did indeed get colic. Techno had enough sense and self-preservation instinct not to try to comment on it. But since their house could never be too quiet, Tommy was very eager to do it for him, wincing at every, even the smallest, whimper, throwing an supposedly very hateful glance towards Wilbur's room and commenting aloud how he had been unable to get enough sleep. The latter was absolute bullshit, because Phil personally looked into his room every time he made sure Wilbur was doing well, and each time he found his son stretched out on the bed in crumpled sheets, with Henry under his arm and consciousness somewhere in another dimension.

Besides, even without this knowledge, it wouldn't take much to see, under all the anger and resentment, the same attention-hungry boy who cried every time his brothers went out to sleepovers and didn't want to take him too. Phil remembered to this day that he had to let him sit late in the living room each time, under a thick blanket, a fluffy cow on his lap, and Steve and Friend at his sides.

"I was abandoned," he repeated every time Phil reached for the remote, saying it was time to go to sleep. "And no one cares. And nobody wants to play with me."

Even if there was no real sadness in it after the first three times, the method still worked, the movie continued, and the boy buried deeper into the pillows, pulling the blanket up to his nose to hide his smile.

Phil couldn't describe how much he loved him, even in the most gremlin version. And, as the years passed, he still couldn't be mad at him for too long, especially if he looked like a puppy whose door had been shut in front of him, and who could only scratch the doorframe sadly and whine. On the other hand, he really didn't want to run interference between his sons either, urging them to kindly talk to each other eventually. He was far too tired for that, and, painfully he admitted it, probably too old. So he opted for the simplest solution and on the same day presented to Wilbur a new stroller.

"Try it," he encouraged, already strapping Fundy into it. The baby immediately grimaced, let out a short scream, and waved his legs, but apparently he wasn't displeased enough to make the effort to cry. "You can go to the park while it's warm. And take Tommy with you to help."

Wilbur looked unconvinced at all, and it was hard to judge whether he disliked the fact that Fundy was away from his hands; the vision of potential fresh air poisoning and sunstroke, which he hadn't been exposed to in weeks; or being stuck with his little brother. None of these doubts, however, was voiced aloud, as he was too intimidated by an expensive gift to show any ingratitude, just as predicted. Under normal circumstances, Phil would feel bad about manipulating him in such an obvious way. But it gave him time to clean the upstairs room, put the laundry in, and finish his job, which he thought was a fair trade.

The boys returned a good hour and a half later, just as he was planning to call and make sure they had taken the extra blanket.

"I'll never let him come near my son again," Wilbur said as he entered the room, Fundy pressed tightly against his chest, as if an unexpected attack might come from either side. "He almost killed him!"

With a heavy sigh, Phil closed his laptop and leaned out in his chair to get a better view. Fundy didn't seem hurt. In fact, he was surprisingly calm and completely absorbed in flipping the rattle. Not at all like a would-be murder victim.

Tommy, so far lurking a bit behind, probably so as not to accidentally be within reach of his brother, just rocked on his heels, making an innocent face.

"And he liked it," he said, nodding at the baby.

Wilbur shot him a murderous look and seemed to want to hit Tommy, but at the last moment he remembered that his hands were full. Only then did he turn to his father, making exactly the same face as he always tried to demonstrate in a series of very important and unimaginative examples how terribly unfairly he was treated in his own home.

"I let him push the stroller to make himself useful for once," he said, trying very ineptly to stay calm. Phil just hummed, already seeing the error in his reasoning. "I had to run after him all the way because he did some wild rally down the street. And he didn't react at all when I told him to stop!"

"No I didn't!" Tommy huffed. "I was on the sidewalk, not on the street!"

Wilbur took a deep breath, turning red with anger.

"Something could have happened!" He growled a little too loudly, and Fundy instantly pivoted in his arms, staring at him wide-eyed. Apparently, no one had ever raised their voices in his immediate presence before. Nothing good could last forever. "You could have knocked it over, or you could have run into someone, or you could have tripped, or-"

"Buuut I didn't." Tommy cut in on his word, rocking on his heels again. "And he was laughing."

"I'll slap you," Wilbur moved toward him, but immediately changed his mind when the sudden movement finally pulled Fundy out of his trance. The baby winced, hesitating for another second how to express his emotions properly, before finally betting on the old, proven, ear-splitting scream. Wilbur immediately bounces him gently in his arms, his anger instantly forgotten, completely absorbed in tender reassurances that nothing bad was happening. Only when he looked up at his father after a long moment did he frown again. "What?"

Phil shrugged, not thinking to stop smiling wryly.

"Nothing. I just remembered how you always put Tommy in the cart and raided the store. Beautiful times." He sighed, staring into space for effect, completely ignoring his son's indignation. "I was wondering if it wouldn't have any effect on him..."

"You see?" Predictably, Tommy immediately sided with him. "It is all your fault. And what was there to complain for?"

Wilbur didn't answer and only scowled first at one then at the other before turning on his heel and marching upstairs, muffling a child's scream behind the closed door.

So the plan didn't go exactly as it should. Like most of the plans Phil had that included his children. But what they usually had in common was that, even when they turned out to be a disgraceful failure, they led to something good in some strange, inexplicable way. Which is why Phil wasn't surprised when he looked into Tommy's room that evening - to remind him that even on weekends he couldn't spend all night playing with his friends - just to find the inside dark and the computer turned off. Nor was the boy in the living room, on the terrace, or at Wilbur's. There was a splash of water and muffled conversation from the bathroom, and when Phil pushed the door slightly ajar, he found not only one, but three kids at once.

Fundy seemed to be having way too much fun splashing the water in all directions, especially when someone had accidentally come within its reach. Tommy, judging by the soaked T-shirt, had already been hit with water and made the appropriate conclusions, because he tried to keep a safe distance, while supporting the baby's head so that he would not turn over in the plastic tub. Wilbur kept an eye on the situation, completely ignoring the fact that more water went to his jeans than to his baby.

"No, wait, not like that." He grunted disapprovingly, trying to correct his brother's positioning. "Well, I'm saying it's wrong. You need a little more-"

Tommy shoved him away with his free hand.

"I can do it myself," he grunted, reaching for the soapy washcloth. "And he likes me more anyway. It's probably because I don't stink like you."

Wilbur's eyelid didn't even twitch.

"Fundy, throw up on him," he ordered, like an officer giving an order.

Tommy grimaced and took a step back.

"Yuck, babies can throw up? Gross!"

Phil, as silently as he could, retreated into the corridor, temporarily distracting himself from the deficiencies in basic biological knowledge of his youngest child. At the moment, the only thing that mattered to him was that, by some miracle, the three of them were in the same room together and managing not to kill each other. Although they clearly tried. There was only one person missing from the complete picture, and although Phil was still a bit offended by the absolute lack of faith in his ability to handle a baby, he had to admit that Techno looked a little too cute with Fundy in his arms earlier. Like a bear trying not to squash a little kitten.

He found his son in his room, standing in front of the bookshelf, hands deep in his pockets and his eyes wandering over the spines of the books. Usually, he was eager to use the library, but he always had to own his favorite books, so piles of them also took up part of the desk and even one of the wardrobes. The latter was once discovered by Phil when he was trying to put in fresh laundry and instead of socks he found all three editions of Greek mythology, including the one for children, which no one liked, and somehow kept magically appearing in different parts of the house. Techno didn't see the slightest problem with keeping underwear and T-shirts under the bed, and pouted when Phil told him to go through his books and carry those he no longer read to the basement. In the end, they compromised - they bought a new, larger bookcase and even more books, which to an outsider might look like bad parenting, but the socks returned to their place, and that was what it was all about. Until next vacation, of course.

Phil had no intention of stressing himself unnecessarily and asking if at the moment, in the small room in the dorm, even one flat surface wasn't sagging from the textbooks. Instead, he stood beside him, following his child's gaze, feeling a surge of longing every time he noticed one of those books he had read to him in his sleep.

He very much hoped Fundy would be an equally good listener.

"I didn't throw anything away," he said finally, because although the silence between them was rarely uncomfortable, Techno was clearly looking for something.

He shook his head without even turning his head.

"I know," he replied, as casually as possible. Phil had known him for a long time, however, so as not to notice how his arms relaxed and his chest lifted in a slightly deeper breath. "It'd be damn unfair if you just dumped my stuff, but you left that glittery shit in the living room."

If Wilbur heard him, he would have gone indignant, because regardless of the passage of time he loved to defend his blue cones with exactly the same stubbornness as when he later pulled his father by the sleeve, asking him to hide them somewhere before the guests came and God forbid he would tell where they came from. Phil couldn't wait for Fundy to gain a little more awareness and ask his father about it. Maybe he'll even get them to hold once he grows out of the hand-to-mouth reflex. So not too fast.

"They have their charm."

Techno rolled his eyes, but the corners of his mouth twitched slightly.

"Tommy's with Wilbur, if you're looking for him."

"Yhm. I know."

Techno looked at him almost expectantly, as if checking what he was going to do with the information.

"They're both holding the baby wrong, by the way," he said, looking back at the bookshelf. "And this bathtub is about to topple. But I didn't say anything." He shrugged, just like someone who really only wants peace and harmony in the world, not to prove himself right. But before anyone could tell him that speaking produces surprisingly many sounds for nothing, he reached out and tapped one of the books with his finger. "A third volume is missing."

Phil tilted his head to read the title and smiled embarrassedly.

"Ah, yeah. It's in my room. I didn't have time to finish it before you left, I wanted to catch up a bit."

It's been ages since Techno stopped leaving new books on his nightstand just to hide his smile later, every time he caught his father actually reading them. Even more than that since he made friends his age and was able to share his passion without forcing his brothers to fight illiteracy. But even though Phil knew that his opinion counted less and less, and sometimes he wasn't asked at all, somehow he couldn't abandon this little tradition of theirs. Especially now, when his son was so damn far away and no telephone or internet could replace the shared Saturday mornings.

Techno finally looked up from the books, but even looking directly at his father, he still seemed to be looking for something, some answer to a question he never asked.

"You wanted to finish the book," he said at last, as if he needed confirmation that he had solved an incredibly difficult puzzle well.

Phil nodded.

"Yes."

"To talk to me about it?"

"When you come back, yes," he confirmed, understanding less and less where they were going, repeating the same thing over and over. "That was the plan."

Techno tilted his head as if he had a better view from a different angle, his gaze only grew alert, his eyebrows frowned and his lips pressed into a narrow line. And then suddenly he smiled, wide and sincere, with the same fondness he had once looked at Tommy as he fell asleep against his side in the middle of a chapter.

"You miss me."

Phil had no idea how to take that simple statement. Mainly because he didn't expect it at all, especially not from Techno. His brutal honesty somehow rarely embraced the simplest, sweetest gestures, let alone his feelings.

"Of course I miss you," he confirmed, almost offended that anyone would have doubts about it. "How could I not miss you?"

Techno thought for a moment, still smiling at his own thoughts, but a bit more flustered.

"I don't know." He shrugged, having at least the decency not to start inventing non-existent evidence on the spot. "Somehow... Somehow I didn't think it worked both ways."

If anyone else, Tommy, or God forbid Wilbur said that, Phil would instantly feel as if someone had burned a big hole in the center of his heart. He might not be the perfect father, shit, he certainly wasn't, no matter how hard and long he tried, but he liked to believe that some things turned out better than others. There was something reassuring about the fact that even though they quarreled at times and things didn't go as planned, his sons always knew how much he cared about them, that they always felt loved and they had no doubts that he would not change them for anything else, even for peace, quiet and more than one full night's sleep per year.

If anyone else had said it, it would have shaken the foundations of that faith and most likely would have started a whole spiral of self-torment and remorse. But Techno has never been good at talking about feelings, any more than he has been able to call them by their names and combine cause and effect.

"It's been a year," he once said, on one of those Saturday mornings when time passed a little differently, everything seemed a little less important and they could just enjoy the here and now. Until Wilbur grew tired of the lack of attention and decided to fall into the middle of their peace with all his chaos. "Since you took me," he clarified, resting his cheek on his hands stretched out on the table. "One year. I was counting."

Phil slowly set his coffee mug down, leaning a little more over the table.

"Still counting?" He asked, trying very hard to hide a little bit of regret in his voice, the very one he was probably going to spend the next night worrying about.

Techno must have felt it, because he raised his head and for a moment just stared at him silently, increasingly frustrated.

"I don't know why," he finally confessed, wincing slightly, clearly disappointed with himself. "I guess... I guess I'm less afraid when I think you've endured so much with me and you still want me." He shrugged, but though he kept his face indifferent, he still blushed and glared at him, adding, "I'm glad you took me in."

The hope for a restful, healthy sleep loomed on the horizon again, and Phil breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you didn't run away from me after all," he assured him, almost touched by the way the boy immediately relaxed as soon as he covered his hand with his.

Despite everything, Techno frowned, glancing at him in incomprehension.

"Why?"

At first, Phil had no idea how to answer, or even how to understand the question itself. In the second, he still didn't know, but since in such cases every second of delay left his children far too much room for doubt, he ended up betting on plain honesty.

"Well..." He smiled, leaning a little lower and lowering his voice as if revealing a great secret. "Between us, Wilbur would be a very obnoxious only child."

Techno huffed so loud it probably scared the birds in the garden away.

"Wilbur is very obnoxious anyway," he said confidently, seriously, and with a little truth.

Phil had no intention of awarding him the latter, but he suspected that a laugh had betrayed him anyway.

"Just a little, and only when he wants to be," he added, to soften the facts that Wilbur would surely call "slander." "But aside from that," he continued in a slightly more serious tone, "I'm glad to have you. Without you, we would always be missing something."

Techno's face softened instantly.

"Oh," he just said, looking down at their still clasped hands. Phil squeezed his fingers a little tighter.

"We needed you. Maybe even more than you needed us."

Techno blinked, inhaling a little louder, his eyes visibly moist.

"Oh," he repeated, resting his forehead on his forearm, tucking his face into the sleeves of his pajamas. Even then, he didn't withdraw his hand, though, and let Phil stroke his head, brushing individual pink strands behind his ear.

Almost ten years later, his hair was a much lighter color, and he had to slouch in his embrace, but he still let his father hold him tightly, pulling him close. Phil couldn't imagine that he would ever let him go.

"Of course I miss you," he confessed without even the slightest hesitation, though the mere fact that he had to say something so obvious still hurt a bit. "I miss you every day that you are away. Just as I missed Wilbur."

Techno hummed in understanding and straightened up so he could rest his chin on his father's head. Phil could clearly imagine his smile, exactly the same every time, since he discovered that due to the absolutely undue extra centimeters, now he was entitled to that gesture.

So he was surprised to hear no point or joke about it. Instead, Techno sounded strangely serious, even by its own standards.

"Did you tell him that?"

Phil frowned, backing away, but still keeping his hands on his shoulders.

"What?"

Techno gasped in frustration.

"Well, that you missed him," he prompted, perhaps miraculously refraining from rolling his eyes at the same time. Which only made Phil feel even more confused.

"He knows," he said, in all the absurdity of the situation, almost waiting for someone to deny it.

Techno just looked at him closely and shrugged.

"Okay. If you say so," he muttered, and then, so as not to leave his father any hope, he added, "But he acts like he doesn't know."

If Phil had been given the opportunity to go back in time just to kick himself, it is very possible that he would have chosen the very moment where he chose to pretend he didn't understand, and preferably didn't hear the last sentence at all.

* * *

Deep down, Phil was counting on just one moment of respite, at least one glimpse of normality in all the chaos. So he wasn't entirely surprised to find one of his sons in the kitchen on Saturday morning. He was, however, very surprised that Wilbur was the chosen one. The same boy who had never been able to get out of bed before ten, especially since he got Tommy into computer games and both had slipped down a rung on the addiction ladder, was now sitting over a cup of coffee at half past eight, disheveled, in an old sweat suit and a step closer to fainting. Judging from the bruises under his eyes, one cup of coffee didn't even get through the thick layer of fatigue, so Phil set the kettle carefully for two more and one

extra for himself. It was only when he was pouring boiling water over the grounds that Wilbur awoke from his half-sleep, shuddered, and looked at him with such a shock as if he didn't quite understand how he was suddenly sharing space with another living being.

Phil couldn't tell him he fully understood his pain, except for one night with Fundy, he never had to care for a baby for more than a few minutes. But he was still awakened in the middle of the night often enough that it was quite natural for him to feel sympathy.

"Hi." There was no reaction other than a nod of the head. "Fundy's asleep?"

Wilbur shifted uneasily, looking everywhere but at him, not even trying to be subtle in it.

"Yhm," he finally muttered, his fingers gripping the cup a little tighter. "But I'm going to him soon," he added quickly, almost defensively, as if he expected someone to try to strip him of his title of good parent at any moment on account of such a shocking and shameful abandonment. If he believed he had one at all.

Phil just nodded understandingly. If Fundy had inherited some of the genes from his father, 'soon' might come sooner than they would like.

"Relax, nothing is happening now. Take a moment of silence while you can," he advised, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect, as Wilbur turned to peer through the open door toward the stairs. It was hard to judge if he was more afraid that he would have to climb them again at any moment, or if he was praying for it just to avoid further conversation. For his own sake, Phil chose to pretend he hadn't noticed it at all. "Relax," he repeated, carefully taking the mug of cold coffee from his son's hand and replacing it with a new one. "I won't judge you for needing a moment to yourself. I didn't drink any hot coffee in the first six months that you moved in with me and twice as long after Techno showed up."

There was no way Wilbur actually obeyed and relaxed even a little. But at least he forced himself to smile, and difficult situations called for appreciating the slightest glimmer of hope.

"So it was easier with Tommy?"

Phil laughed, though the memory made him feel a wave of fatigue settle down on his shoulders with the full weight. One of the good ones, full of satisfaction and confidence that he is doing something really good with his life and maybe even changing someone's world for the better - but still a burden.

"With Tommy, I never had time to make one."

This time Wilbur's smile seemed a little more sincere, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. But when Phil was already beginning to hope that maybe a light had finally appeared at the end of a very long tunnel, his son extinguished it with one quick puff.

"I've been thinking a bit about what to do next," he blurted out as he exhaled, instinctively trying to tighten his fingers on the mug and then pulling them back when it turned out to be hot. "I mean what to do with myself."

Phil was silent for a moment, refusing to urge him that after he had drunk more than half of the mug's contents, it was clear that the rest would not come by itself.

"That's good. Any ideas?"

Wilbur grimaced as he slumped a little lower in his chair.

"Not really, no," he confessed, clearly embarrassed.

However nice it would be to hear from him that he had already thought through all his options, picked the best ones, found a job, a nursery, and enrolled in college, all within two days, and it was scary to think what he would achieve in a week - Phil was not at all surprised that the vision remained pure fantasy. Life had taught him to limit himself in his expectations, so for the moment he was completely satisfied that his son stopped looking like he had spent several months living in the sewers with rats, eating only what he had hunted. Not insulting the rats, of course.

Wilbur needed time. He was a teenager thrown in a new, damn difficult role, he had let problems build up for far too long, and it was hard to count on taking him to a new place to automatically fix everything.

But it didn't hurt to start there.

"I think we can start by packing your things." Phil involuntarily winced at the mere mention of his son's apartment. And then again, at the thought of having to put it in order if they wanted some money back. Really, it would be much easier to use a bulldozer and rebuild it from scratch, brick by brick. "Better get it over with quickly."

For some reason, Wilbur seemed scared of the idea, much more than he should have scraped a thick layer of dirt off the floor.

"Oh," he muttered, staring at his cup again. "Yes, that... That sounds like a plan."

His voice was breaking and his chin was trembling, which was definitely not a good sign, but it wasn't until he sniffed, quickly wiping his nose with his sleeve that Phil woke up from shock enough to stop staring passively.

"Wilbur..." he began, but he didn't take a single step before the boy sprang up from his chair with such force that he staggered and had to hold onto the walls.

"I'll go take a shower," he muttered, a trembling hand running through his hair, already backing towards the living room. "Before Tommy starts saying that I stink and... And everything."

"Wilbur." Phil tried again, but his son only quickened his pace, almost running up the stairs, surprisingly smoothly for someone who looked like he had just been pushed over the brink of another nervous breakdown.

Phil came very close to sharing his fate. He even wanted to help fate and take the last, missing step himself.

The day hadn't even started properly, and he somehow felt bloody lonely in a house full of people, as he finished the coffee all by himself. Usually it took him at least a couple of hours to get here, but apparently it was time to get his stats up. He was almost prepared for the fact that when he went back upstairs he would be greeted by another tragedy, or at best deaf silence, but, surprisingly, he could hear his youngest child's voice from the stairs, vibrating with excitement and interrupted by laughter, but not even halfway as loud as when talking to Tubbo.

He found Tommy in Wilbur's room, stretched on his back on the bed, in the crumpled sheets that no one bothered to fold. He was holding the phone above his head, occasionally lowering it a little lower so that Fundy, lying next to him, could also get a close look at details that surely fascinated him much more than the mere fact that someone was waving something bright and colorful in front of his face.

"This is Tubbo." Tommy ran his thumb across the screen, looking at his nephew with a very serious expression. "You're supposed to like Tubbo because he's awesome. If I find out that you have drooled him, I'll take your toys from you," he threatened, pulling the teddy fox by the tail to reinforce the message. Fundy kicked his legs, but it was hard to tell if he was even worried about it because he kept his eyes wide on the phone. If Phil had been a little less affected for the moment, he would have started scheduling an appointment with an ophthalmologist and addiction center for him. "And that's a boobboy. You can call him Ranboo, but it's less fun. You wanna be funny, don't you?" Fundy shouted, waving his fist in the air. "Well, I thought so. This is Schlatt, but you know him. Wilbur says he helped him with you." This time Tommy looked at the baby almost enviously. "You're mean, you know? You've barely shown up and you've been hitting the best of yourselves," he grunted, met with a total lack of response except for a broad yawn and a few gasps. Tommy grimaced, but seemed to think he wasn't offended as he went back to their private slideshow. "Oh, and this is Techno, when he fell over in the garden. Don't tell him I have this photo, I'm keeping it for a special occasion."

Phil knew all too well which photo was meant. Mainly because he was there when it was taken, and when he finished his lecture about not laughing at someone else's misfortune, he asked for a copy. Rules are rules, but some things were just too funny. Now he laughed at the mere mention, too, and Tommy immediately looked up, instinctively pressing the phone to his chest. He didn't smile, but he didn't grimace either, which was a pretty promising start for the day.

Fundy hummed dissatisfiedly, cut off from his new favorite pastime, and waved his hands in the air. Phil was ready to assume that another child had just arrived at the house with the unconditional reflex to stick their fingers where they should never be, and leave fingerprints in numbers that even the '80s police wouldn't be able to miss.

"Hi." He smiled as he sat down on the bed, already instinctively reaching for the baby to show that no one had even thought of leaving him alone for a second. "I see you two are getting along."

Tommy didn't look at him as Phil stepped out of his way to drill a hole in his head with his eyes. Maybe at least then he could guess what exactly was going on inside.

"He started whining," Tommy only grunted, nodding at the child, pretending that he was very engrossed in writing on the phone. Phil might even have believed it if he hadn't personally spent a few months teaching him the alphabet in pain and suffering, just to make all that effort go to hell because someone had invented "voice messages".

"All right. I'm not saying that you are doing something wrong," he assured because from a distance he could already sense when his child was gathering a whole series of complaints about everything and nothing. "Quite the opposite, actually."

Tommy just looked at him suspiciously and moved a little closer to the edge of the mattress. Phil grabbed his arm at the last moment and held him in place before he could dash into his room and barricade himself in it for the rest of the day.

"Look," he began, trying very hard to remain calm and optimistic, though he didn't like the way Tommy brushed his hand off. Was he a bad father if he sometimes wanted Techno to be around constantly, ready to react? He had a strange feeling that a good answer shouldn't start with 'Yes, but-'. "I know everything suddenly got complicated. I probably wouldn't be delighted if I were you, too. But why not try to approach it like you did just now and lighten up a little? And sulk less?"

Tommy, of course, puffed up his cheeks immediately.

"I'm not sulking!" He was indignant, portraying the essence of the problem very nicely.

Phil was eager to take his phone, take a picture, and present indisputable evidence, but at the last moment he changed his mind.

"You do, a little bit," he repeated, waiting a moment for another denial, but apparently he didn't even deserve it, because the boy only pursed his lips tighter, tapping the phone with such force that if Phil hadn't grabbed his wrist in time, he would probably have punched a hole in it. "Tommy."

Pros: finally got a reaction. Cons: he just started to understand what Techno meant when he said that Tommy sometimes asks to be slapped.

"What now?" He snapped, stepping back even farther, as if he had somehow sensed this sudden change. But his face was still exactly the same, so Phil didn't draw any conclusions from it.

Phil glanced down at Fundy, first to make sure he was not hurt, second to look at some nice, sweet, and thankfully still mute child for a change.

"Can you at least pretend you're listening to me?" He asked, ignoring the urgent need to use completely different and definitely less pleasant words. He had already accumulated enough guilt for one day, he didn't need any more.

But Tommy hadn't made it any easier for him.

"Just leave me alone," he muttered, putting down the phone as if Phil were cutting off his arm, alive and without anesthesia. "Why are you constantly picking on me? Wilbur suddenly shows up with a baby and you don't blame him about anything at all!"

Phil wasn't entirely sure if this was to try to change the subject, or if his son was really so engrossed in his own emotions that he didn't sense the atmosphere in the house. If the latter - he was fucking envious of him.

"I blame him as much as I should, believe me," he assured, immediately feeling even worse with how bitter it sounded when spoken aloud. Fundy shifted uneasily, tapping both fists on his hand, as if trying to remind him that hey, maybe he was the cause of the family crisis and was going to put them all to the grave, but at least he was cute. So much so that even Tommy looked at him a little more gently, and while he still hadn't moved from his strategically chosen 'three seconds and I'm not here' position, he relaxed his shoulders a bit.

"He's really gonna stay?" He asked suddenly, much quieter and calmer than before. "Fundy."

He reached out to nudge the little foot lightly and smiled as he received a clumsy kick in response.

Phil immediately felt the anger begin to melt within him.

"Why wouldn't he stay?" He asked, not because he didn't understand exactly where the question came from, but rather to clarify which of the million potential problems he was facing. He wouldn't be surprised if Tommy, like himself, got a little too used to the fact that children usually show up after a hundred phone calls and filling a pile of paperwork. And that sometimes, unfortunately, they go through a 'trial period' first before actually becoming part of the family.

Tommy still hasn't looked up at him, now trying to pull Fundy's sock off for some reason.

"What if Sally changes her mind?" He asked finally, and okay, out of all the possible questions he chose the one Phil wasn't prepared for. He wasn't even sure if you could be ready for something like that, or if he had the right to comment on it at all.

If he was to be completely honest, no matter what a different future he wanted for his son, how much simpler Wilbur's life would be if he did not have to care for anyone but himself at such a young age, and how many problems they could have avoided then - he couldn't imagine that Fundy could just disappear like that. Maybe he was old and touched too easily, or maybe he was just never cut out for breakups, but he had already become attached to the thought that, if somewhat unexpectedly, he had become a grandfather. Just as he became attached to the child himself, though he was still terrified of holding something so small and delicate in his arms. He would miss it, he would miss crying in the middle of the night and Techno's constant remarks and all those memories that had not yet had a chance to arise. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to get back to a reality just like that, in which he wouldn't have to worry about how much character Fundy would inherit from his father and how they would survive it.

But despite all these feelings, from some vague longing that had no reason to exist yet, he knew that the final decision wasn't his. Wilbur still had the right to change his mind now that he had finally gotten a chance to breathe a little, calm down, and stop being constantly awake and in perpetual danger. He had the right to rethink the situation and admit that he would not be able to cope, that this was not the future he wanted for himself, and even more so for his child. He had the right to say that all this was beyond him and he would not be able to do it, mentally or physically. And it was Phil's duty to acknowledge this and put the welfare of his child above his own feelings. Wilbur was his top priority, no matter what. Even if for the rest of his life he would be tormented by remorse and the thought that deep down he was condemning his son for it, just a little.

"I don't know," he admitted honestly, wanting to be able to say something completely different. "First of all, I can't decide for Wilbur."

Tommy winced slightly, but if he wanted to take the moment to insult his brother again, he managed to hold back.

"But if you were to decide?" He asked with some fresh surge of determination.

Phil wasn't sure he liked where the conversation was starting to go.

"I'm not a big fan of her," he replied as diplomatically as possible, winning the Underselling of the Year Award. "I don't think any of us are."

Tommy nodded, reaching for the teddy fox and smiling briefly when Fundy immediately reached out for him, trying hard to roll over to his side.

"She left him. She left Fundy."

Phil regretted more and more that he had started the subject at all. He could have let Tommy spoil the baby's eyesight with the phone and save the last bit of good humor, but no, of course, he wanted to talk to his own baby...

"She did," he nodded, watching Fundy immediately stuff his whole fox ear into his mouth. "And it's very hard for me to defend her."

Tommy snorted under his breath.

"I told you she's a terrible bitch."

"You did."

"I felt it right away."

"You did."

He lifted his head, looking his father straight in the eye for the first time.

"And would you still give him back to her?"

Phil wasn't sure what he disliked better - that appraising gaze or reproachful tone. Not that it mattered more, both of them were doing their job very effectively, pushing him closer and closer to the brink of complete collapse.

"Tommy..." he tried again, even sounding quite pathetic in his own mind, but he was tired, so damn tired of explaining the same thing over and over again and defending himself when he really didn't think he had done anything wrong.

Tommy, of course, had no intention of letting go.

"Would you give him back or not?"

"It's not my decision."

"But if?"

"Tommy, it's not that simple."

The boy flinched, looking at him as if he had just been hit in the face by him. But before Phil could even consider what exactly he said wrong this time, Tommy frowned and got out of bed.

"It's very fucking simple," he growled, picking up his phone from the sheets. "First you say that you won't let us do anything, and then suddenly 'nothing is simple'."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment. He wasn't sure if he wished Tommy were still in the room when he opened them or not.

"It has *never* been easy. But you were just a kid and you didn't notice it."

Perhaps he shouldn't be saying it so openly. Maybe he should pretend to the very end that he knew what he was doing for at least one moment, instead of improvising and making mistake after mistake. Maybe he should pretend that the few months when Tommy first showed up at their house weren't too damn hard and painful for him either, that he never cried at night, questioned every decision, and wasn't about to give up once a week on average. Maybe he should let at least one of his sons still think him strong.

If so, he just missed his only chance. And Tommy wasn't planning on giving him another. He didn't even glance his way, tumbling out of the room, stomping furiously all the way down the hall.

But he didn't slam the door, at least.

Techno showed up at the door a dozen minutes later when it was almost certain that Wilbur was trying to drown himself in the shower, and Phil was pacing the room, clinging to Fundy as a last resort from the ultimate insanity.

"If you start lecturing me that I'm holding him wrong, I'll probably hit you," he growled, and his son immediately stepped back, raising his hands in surrender.

"Wow, okay, okay, I'm not saying anything," he assured, in one short sentence proving that he had at least twice as much will to live as his brothers. "What's up with Tommy? I could hear him from my room." He glared at his father, probably waiting for the tan to take his youngest chastisement from gods in defense, and when nothing happened, he frowned and straightened, glancing toward the corridor. "Should I talk to him? I can."

Phil had no doubts he could. Just as he had no doubts it would result in either an even bigger row or a surprising twist in which Tommy would open up to the world, ready to talk maturely with just about anyone, except his own parent. He didn't even have the strength to think which option would irritate him more at that moment...

"Leave him. It's my fault." He sighed heavily, bouncing Fundy in his arms. The child looked at him with a mouth full of his own fingers, then realized they had company and stretched out his hands towards Techno, shouting urgently.

Phil felt pitiful that even this betrayal touched him deeply.

"I just... I can't get along with him lately," he confessed, sitting down heavily on the bed while Fundy, already handed over to his favorite arms, chewed his uncle's pink hair with utmost calm. Techno argued that, according to the internet, there was nothing strange or dangerous about it. Wilbur used a great many swear words to describe how little he cares about such sources.

"He'll get more conciliatory once I kick him," Techno muttered, still glancing at the door, but he couldn't look scary with the baby in his arms, especially when he was clearly trying not to scare him. "What happened? Generally, not now."

Phil rubbed his fingers over the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes for a moment. On the one hand, he had his principles and really tried not to tell one child the other's affairs and problems, for the benefit of all. On the other... He was tired. He was bloody tired, had no idea what to do, and needed to talk to someone other than his own growing doubt.

"Sam called a while ago," he began, trying to choose as neutral words as possible. Even if his own emotions were as far from it as possible. "Tommy's mother requested a meeting."

Contrary to what he expected, Techno didn't look particularly shocked.

"Oh," he just said, grimacing. "Now she remembers? It took her a while," he assessed almost indifferently, but then he thought, frowned and tensed. "Hey, but she can't take him back now, right?"

There was so much fear in his eyes and so much fear in his voice that Phil would have laughed at different times. Techno might have tried to pretend that his little brother was only irritating him and making his life difficult, but moments like this were almost tangible proof that deep down he had an even greater soft spot for him than for Wilbur. He was just a little better at hiding it.

"No," he calmed down, and Techno took a deep breath, bouncing Fundy in his arms. "And I don't think she's trying. But she was very insistent on meeting him." He hesitated, not entirely sure if he should keep it to himself, but then slowly added, "I think she wanted to apologize."

It didn't make the slightest impression on Techno.

"Or she's sick and wants his kidney," he only snorted, earning a scolding look for it. "What? I wouldn't be surprised!" He pouted. "And what? Tommy heard about this?"

This is how they got to the real heart of the problem. Phil was still not sure if he wanted to go any further, this time out of sheer fear that maybe he was wrong after all and he would be reprimanded for it.

"Tommy said... lots of things. And he didn't even want to hear about it."

Techno nodded.

"All right," he said, and there was a hint of pride in his voice. "Maybe he's not that stupid after all. But what's the problem?"

Fundy stretched and yawned widely, his mouth still full of hair. Phil fucking envied him this carefreeness. He would give very, very much to have so much peace and almost zero awareness for just one day.

"We had a bit of a fight about that," he admitted, bracing himself. "I told him he shouldn't be making such firm decisions just yet. Take some time and think it over well. So he wouldn't cut himself off from his roots so easily. He didn't take it very well."

He winced at the mere mention. "Not very well" didn't reflect the indignation with which his youngest child looked at him, how much bitterness was in his voice and how hurt he seemed despite all the explanations that no one really wanted to hurt him or force him to do anything. Phil hadn't seen him so angry since he had pulled him out from under the table in the basement, and he still had tooth marks on his hand from the latter. He wasn't at all sure if it was a good thing that there were no similar scenes this time. Of the two bad things, he preferred his kids screaming to their shutting themselves in their rooms and refusing to go out to talk. And Tommy could be damn stubborn. Two days passed before he began to accept the food left at the door at all, and another three before he finally left the room further than to go to the bathroom. Phil was on the verge of endurance by then, and was almost holding the phone in his hand to call Techno, so even though the boy remained cool, distant, and at times damn mean, he still considered the change to be progress.

Techno didn't say anything at first, just looking at him with an unreadable face, as if waiting for some continuation, or trying very hard to connect everything together and make any sense from the whole. Even he had to give up in the end.

"I'm not surprised," he said dryly, frowning. "With all due respect, dad, but what the fuck?"

Phil grimaced, not so much as a curse, but rather with some overwhelming resignation that had lurked all the time on the horizon but only now fully seeped into him.

"He's still a child," he tried anyway. "He doesn't look at it objectively. He doesn't understand that he may never have that chance again. He doesn't know-" he broke off, lowering his arms, noticing that he was not going to do anything about it. In fact, at this point he couldn't even convince himself. "You don't think I'm right."

"Absolutely." Techno nodded so hard his hair slapped Fundy in the face, breaking his nap for a moment. "I didn't think I'd say this, but I'm on Tommy's side. I'd be pissed off too," he added, as if he really thought his father hadn't had enough remorse anymore and needed to finish him off even harder. But immediately he hesitated, took a deep breath, once, twice, then on the third heavily sighed and sat down next to Phil on the mattress. "I mean... I know you probably have your reasons," he said amicably, though without even one gram of conviction. "Probably a whole lot and probably all of them are very smart and everything. But if you ever said something like that to me..." He pursed his lips, focusing only on the baby in his arms for a moment. "I would probably think that you want to leave the gate open. To get rid of me in a while," he confessed, much more quietly and less confidently than before, and Phil immediately reached out, quite instinctively, to touch his shoulder, but froze in the middle of the gesture.

He really wanted to argue further and convince everyone, especially himself, that Tommy is different, more trusting, more aware, less marked by the past. Of all the siblings, he is the one who has the least doubts that their home would never be a home without him.

But every time he tried, his throat ached and he could only think of the boy in his car asking if no one would ever take his place in his own family.

He must have looked even more pathetic than he felt, because Techno himself reached for his hand, squeezing lightly.

"Hey." He prodded him with his shoulder, smiling tightly. "Stop torturing yourself and just talk to him. Tommy is... It hurts my throat, but he's smarter than I used to be." He rolled his eyes, though he didn't really amuse anyone. "You can get along with him."

Phil grimaced, far from sure.

"Sometimes you overestimate my abilities."

"Nah. You convinced me not to murder Wilbur when he poured hot chocolate on Steve," he recalled, smiling a little more sincerely this time. "It'll be easier."

Phil really wanted to believe that.

Phil: Anyone want to talk about feelings?

Wilbur: No.

Tommy: I do!

Phil: I know, Tommy.

Tommy: I'm mad >:(

Phil: I know, Tommy...

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Phil talks with Tommy. Fucking finally.

Chapter Notes

Look, new chapter. It's late, but it's here, sooo... Don't be mad, pls.
And I made it with @Katricea help! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil took his time before poking an angry bear with a stick or, less metaphorically, before trying to have a meaningful conversation with his own child. If it were up to him, he would have waited patiently for the problem to resolve itself, or, more realistically, for things to worsen to the point that he would have to intervene to avoid disaster. Apparently, the years of work from deadline to deadline taught him to balance perfectly between procrastination and wild panic.

Unfortunately, Techno had a completely different opinion on this, and repeatedly shot him urgent glances, occasionally grunting significantly, until Phil had no choice but to give up and accept his fate. Fundy wouldn't let anyone else come close anyway, not when his favorite uncle was around, and Wilbur eventually came out of the bathroom, leaving clouds of steam and a completely flooded floor behind him, but he slumped as he passed his father in the hallway and slipped into his room without a word.

Phil couldn't say that it cheered him.

Tommy didn't answer right away when he knocked on the door. It wasn't until the third time that he muttered something that could have been an invitation or a curse. He didn't look up from his notebooks either, and it wasn't until Phil had pulled a second chair over to his desk that he ostentatiously pulled away, stooping to the point where you could almost hear his spine groan.

They sat in silence for a while, one of the heavy and unpleasant ones they had practically never experienced before. Phil was used to Techno's silence, he was used to silence when Wilbur had a bad day and wouldn't leave the room, but Tommy's silence hurt especially badly. Perhaps because when Phil looked at him, he still saw that cheerful child who kept talking even when he was eating. He loved all of his children equally and really tried not to favor any of them, but he had to admit that each of the boys was important to him in a

slightly different way. If he were to be on a desert island with one of them, he would have chosen Techno without hesitation, Wilbur could have gotten away with practically everything as a child, including murder, but it was Tommy who was the easiest one to love, who won his heart the fastest, who was always the most *his* no matter what the documents said. Paradoxically, he was also the only one that Phil had spent a really long time trying not to love before he finally accepted defeat.

He was absolutely sure that Tommy was well aware of this, and at times he even misused it. But he was once just as sure that his older children had already taken for granted that he loved them unconditionally and would never try to replace them. Perhaps their family was just not made to remember, and every now and then they all needed a reminder.

"Hey," he tried, finally breaking the silence. A scratch at the page was so sweeping that the pen was probably piercing three pages away. "You're busy? What are you doing?"

The question was stupid, and the honest answer was probably, 'I'm devastating the corpse of a tree to make it clear that you should fuck off', and Phil could almost hear the words, though Tommy only grimaced and scowled at him. Fortunately, when he finally spoke, he opted for a slightly softer version.

"Homework?" He snorted as if it were obvious that the scribbles were actually a complicated mathematical equation. "What do you want?"

Peace, harmony and another coffee.

"To talk."

As expected, Tommy made a face as if someone had suggested he should do bean bag activities again to straighten his poor spine a little.

"Again? What, Wilbur got another baby?"

Phil had to focus really, really hard to remember that this isn't the best time to scold him for using the exact tone that would normally make Techno hit him on the head.

"No, and I very much hope I don't live to see you have one," he sighed, then rolled his eyes as the boy's mouth twitched slightly in spite of all his anger. "Yes, I know, it's very possible because I'm old. Very funny."

Tommy pursed his lips, very ineptly trying to hide his smile, but he quickly remembered that he was angry, offended, and not showing any weakness.

"Then what do you want?" He grunted, but before Phil could repeat the whole process, refraining from slapping his ear, a yell came from somewhere outside the door.

"Hey! Don't use that tone to your father!"

Tommy immediately cringed, perhaps more instinctively than consciously, as if he could actually get hit from a distance. Phil just sighed inwardly. Sometimes he envied Techno that

authority. He wondered more often when exactly he himself had ceased to inspire any respect in his kids.

"Techno..."

Tommy looked from the door to him and back again, his eyes wide all at once.

"What did he tell you? He told on me?" He said indignantly, almost bouncing in his chair. "I didn't do anything! Those are all lies!"

Phil held up his hands, gesturing for him to calm down a bit. It took a good few seconds, but eventually the boy relaxed a bit and curled up in the chair again into a strange tangle of limbs that wasn't supposed to be comfortable for any human, but apparently worked well for gremlins.

"No one has complained against anyone, take it easy," he assured him, conciliatory. "I just wanted to talk." He waited a moment, but Tommy didn't answer, pulling his notebook back to him and starting to color the page black. "Techno said you were mad at me."

"Wow." The boy scowled at him. "How lucky that he came, because you would never have guessed."

Phil really wished he could genuinely take offense at such taunts, but there was a little too much truth in them.

"I knew you were avoiding me," he tried from the other side, more diplomatically. "And that you are..." he hesitated, searching for the right words, "less pleased than ever."

Somewhere outside the door, someone snorted loudly.

"He's a fucking brat, that's what he is."

"Techno, goddamn it." Phil pivoted in his chair to stare at the closed door, as if his gaze might pierce it right through to the recipient. "I'm going to have a serious talk with you, too," he threatened, and then, to appear firm, he added, "Go and wash the dishes."

The door swung open and Techno stuck his head inside.

"But that's his job!" He said indignantly, pointing his finger at Tommy. Tommy immediately spiked and threw a pen at him, missing the target by a good meter.

"Now." Phil really tried to make it echo at least half the annoyance he actually felt. Mainly because Techno was already bending down to get the pen and he never missed.

"But I don't even live here!" He tried again, and when it didn't work, he grimaced and backed off into the corridor. "Okay, okay..." he capitulated. Then he opened the door again, only to throw a pen across the length of the room and quickly close it again. Tommy screamed, shot right in the head, but he wasn't half as good an actor as Wilbur, so no one cared about his certainly unimaginable suffering.

Phil considered for a moment whether he should at least shout after his older child, but eventually decided that the less attention he paid to Phil, the better.

"He knows perfectly well that I hate eavesdropping," he only muttered, and Tommy, to his surprise, stifled a laugh at the last moment in a cough. "What?"

"Nothing." He shrugged, but though he pouted again immediately, he looked a little less offended at the world. A small step in the right direction. "Do we have to do this now? I'm busy."

If Phil were honest, he would agree to postpone the interview to 'never' and go back to calmly pretending that everything is fine and their family is not falling apart. Unfortunately, for some reason, he was the adult and arguably the most responsible person in all of this.

"We don't have to," he replied slowly, watching his son frown, perhaps a little surprised. "But remember, that whatever happens, you can tell me. Especially if I did something wrong. I promise I won't be angry," he added quickly, because at the moment, if Tommy confessed that he had murdered someone and kept the body under the bed, Phil would only breathe a sigh of relief that they could bury the corpse in the backyard and forget about the whole thing. Who knows, digging together could turn out to be quite a nice family activity...

Unfortunately, Tommy didn't keep any body in the room. But he clearly planned to kill his own father, because after a moment's hesitation he straightened up a bit and, still staring at his notebook, said:

"I was talking to Sam."

Phil wasn't sure what to focus on first. That Tommy had to steal a number from his phone, that Sam never mentioned it, apparently taking the twelve-year-old's decision to be sacred and unquestionable, or that he had been too busy the last few days to even think that no one from Social Services had contacted them for a suspiciously long time.

"Oh," he just said, not even trying to hide the slight resentment in his voice. You might think their family was fed up with hiding important calls, but apparently not. "I didn't know..."

Tommy had at least the decency to blush and for a second he looked like he was a bit sorry. But he shook himself immediately and made a proud face, as if he was getting ready for the battle of his life.

"I told him to tell my mother to fuck off," he said, clearly preparing with all his being for someone to disagree with him and start arguing.

Under different circumstances, Phil might have had the strength to do so.

"Tommy..." he sighed, closing his eyes for a moment.

The boy shifted uneasily, but continued to lift his chin up high.

"I wanted him to tell her that now I don't give a shit about her, just like she didn't give a fuck about me, but he refused."

Phil had a lot of comments on his lips, starting with 'I wonder why?' But somehow he managed to hold back.

"Tommy..." he repeated, moving the chair a little closer to the desk so that he could rest his elbows on the table and lean over to his kid.

The kid who, not so long ago, with the same expression on his face, insisted that his mother would come back for him, soon, very soon, as soon as she remembered about him...

"Listen." He tried again, although he himself had no idea how else he could get to him. "I know you're angry with her. And that's perfectly normal, and it's absolutely okay if you don't want to see her," he added quickly, as the boy was already opening his mouth to cut in. "But maybe... Maybe try not to burn all the bridges behind you yet?"

When he thought about it later, he concluded that it was actually not the best choice of words, and perhaps he deserved and should be smacked on the head for a change in order to save some common sense. But in that second he had nothing of this knowledge, but a lot of good intentions and crystal clear motivation.

It was hard to tell which of the two irritated Tommy the most. And whether he had noticed them at all, absolutely indignant at the words themselves.

"I shouldn't burn bridges?" He repeated, trying to get up and almost falling off the chair. "It's- she- She left me!" He waved his hands in frustration, finally squatting in the chair to add inches. If he was trying to look adult or formidable, he missed it completely. Phil still saw only the scared, bloody wounded child. And it terrified him much, much more. "And even when she was there, she- You know what it was like! You know!" He added emphatically, then inhaled sharply, lowering his hands and sitting sadly on his heels. "And- And you said it wasn't my fault. You said so."

Phil reached out automatically, hesitated, and paused in half a gesture before placing a cautious hand on his son's cheek, sighing with relief as he didn't dodge the touch. He didn't move closer as he was wont to do, but under the circumstances it would be naive to expect it.

"Of course it was not yours," he confirmed, feeling a painful twinge somewhere around his heart as the boy visibly relaxed and some of his anxiety faded from his eyes. Apparently, the list of things to be reminded of was much longer than he had realized. "Tommy, you were just a kid. You're still a child."

Tommy puffed up his cheeks.

"Not at all," he argued, indignant as ever that no one was taking him seriously.

Phil smiled fondly. If it were up to him, his boys would stay little for much longer. Unfortunately, for some reason, all three were very eager to get to adulthood. Wilbur in particular...

He put his other hand on the boy's face, squeezing his cheeks lightly before Tommy broke free, muttering dissatisfiedly.

"Yes you are. And at an extremely ugly age."

Tommy glared at him vigilantly.

"Are you going to tell me how 'my body is changing' again?" He snorted, and when he didn't get a negative answer, his face immediately fell. "I'll call Techno," he threatened, pointing desperately at the door. "I will call Techno to suffer with me."

Phil laughed, amused partly by his dismay, partly by choosing his worst possible ally. Techno came close to dying from embarrassment during their first (and only) serious conversation about the subject - he'd sooner die than attend another.

"It was a normal conversation, there is nothing to be ashamed of," he assured, although he could see that no one believed him for the time being. "But that's not what I meant. I have the impression that everyone in this family is maturing very... dramatically. More like little raccoons in the basement and teaching the kids what to say, to make me adopt them."

The latter still bothered him at night sometimes, especially when he happened to be in a bad mood himself and questioned every decision he made. He remembered a frightened child in a worn yellow sweater, darting silently around the house, making sure three times whether he could cross the magic border of the kitchen's threshold, or, something incredible!, take his food without asking for permission beforehand. He wondered if Wilbur really believed he loved that pale shadow of a child more than the little gremlin he eventually managed to pull out of its shell. He very much hoped not.

(A low voice in his head reminded him that he was still fucking naive.)

Tommy huffed loudly, though he was obviously a little amused himself.

"Wilbur doesn't know shit. We tried it with Tubbo afterwards, but it didn't work."

"Ah." Phil raised an eyebrow. "So that's why he calls me 'Dadza'? That explains a lot." He smiled, but although he would have liked to stay on nicer topics a hundred times more, he knew he would have no peace until he had solved the right problem. Partly because of his own conscience, part - because of Techno. "Tommy, listen." He leaned in a little closer again, but the mere change in tone was enough to make Tommy pull away, frowning and staring at him suspiciously. "I'm not trying to convince you that your mom has changed. And no one can blame you if you still haven't forgiven her. Or if you never forgive. This is not something anyone has a right to expect from you."

Tommy winced, wrinkling his nose.

"But?" He asked. Phil was eager to say that there is no 'but', that they can forget everything and never come back to the topic again. But here was a time for it when Sam first brought the matter up to them - if he had backed out now, Tommy would have remembered that moment of hesitation and, if he were anything like his brothers, sooner or later would have used it to break Phil's heart very dramatically. Which he deserved, and what he probably couldn't avoid anyway.

"But you're at an age now where you get angry a lot more easily and think less often," he finished, trying not to sound like an accusation. "And sometimes you make very hasty decisions and you don't understand." He broke off, hearing the boy sniffle suddenly. He didn't look at him and tried to turn his head, but you could see his lips trembling and his eyes moist. "Tommy?" Phil, completely taken aback by this, reached out to turn his face towards him. "Hey, hey, it's okay."

Tommy jerked violently, brushing his hands away.

"It's not okay at all!" He shouted, leaping up from his chair, almost knocking it over. "I hate it when you do that! You say I can hate her and then you're angry when I actually do!"

Phil slowly raised his hands so Tommy could see them all the time, but made no attempt to approach him anymore. He had years of practice discerning when his kids were just angry and frustrated and when there was more to it.

"I'm not angry," he said calmly. "I could never be angry about it, trust me."

"No!" Tommy clenched his hands into fists, pressing his hands tight to his sides, but while he tried to seem taller and bigger, his shoulders trembled and the first tears rolled down his cheeks. He wiped them quickly with his sleeve, as angry as if he were accusing his own body of a terrible betrayal. "I don't trust you! I don't trust you at all anymore!" He shouted, and even though Phil knew he probably didn't think that at all, that he was just angry and insecure and twelve years old, he still felt offended. "First you say it's not my fault, and- and then you defend her every time. You do that!" He repeated as Phil opened his mouth to protest. "When Wilbur says his foster mother was a mean, stupid bitch, that's fine-"

"Language," he said in a strange mix of reflex and desperation.

"-but when I do it, you suddenly get outraged! And you make me stop and you don't let me talk about it normally and- And you act like you... Like..." Tommy sniffed again and took a deep breath, finally calming down a bit. Or maybe he just didn't have the strength to scream anymore. The trembling, reproachful voice was not much better. "Wilbur can say whatever he wants."

The room grew quiet, and even though Phil knew he should say something as soon as possible, he couldn't let himself show how unprepared he was for this development, it still took a long while to get himself together.

"Because it's not the same," he said, and okay, maybe it sounded better and less pathetic in his head, and much more like a valid argument.

Tommy wiped his nose on his sleeve one more time, and this time he did not withdraw his hand anymore, trying to hide his face as much as possible.

"Why?" growled, still as stubborn and rebellious as clearly desperate. "Because his mother wasn't 'a real one'?"

"Tommy-"

"You are not my real father either!" He shouted, lowering his hand and looking him straight in the eyes. Then he turned pale, took a step back and stared at Phil as if he didn't believe what he had just said himself. "And... And you always said it didn't matter," he added much, much more quietly, making such a despairing face as if all he needed in life was confirmation of that fact.

If Phil were to say the hardest part of parenting, he would first mention lack of sleep, a lot of noise, and way too many dirty dishes that no one was eager to clean. But if he were to be completely honest and face the truth of the very uncomfortable genre, he would have to admit that, regardless of age, all children were sometimes bloody ungrateful. Worse, most of them didn't do it on purpose or intentionally. There was simply a whole separate realm of feelings, that couldn't be unblocked except by learning to love your little private parasite, that no one but a parent could fully understand. It was precisely these feelings that made Phil able to stay calm while putting together a forgotten school model at two in the morning, making nuggets for dinner five days in a row, and ensuring that spilling cocoa was no reason to cry, even though the couch was new and he hadn't had time to enjoy its purity yet. Exactly the same feelings were also regularly put to a very hard test and, in spite of anger, they stuck to you for a damn long time, even if the problem was long solved. Phil never held a grudge for long, not when it came to his sons. But in spite of himself, he remembered all the moments when they had punched him right where it hurt. He remembered how cruel Techno could be in his worst moments, remembered how unpleasant it was to hear his own name in Wilbur's mouth again, he remembered a lot of words shouted out in anger, a lot of small, inconspicuous gestures, he even remembered the stupid pot he had to buy back after the previous one had landed in the trash with all its contents. He remembered all these things, and even though most of them were forgiven immediately and automatically, sometimes they would come back to him and he wondered if it was really worth it.

And even if the answer had always been 'yes', he felt sick with the fact that he had doubts at all.

He was absolutely sure that another cause of sleepless nights had just arrived. But, exactly as it always did, it didn't matter, not now that his child needed attention more than his own feelings.

"It doesn't," he confirmed, and Tommy drew in a louder breath and wrapped his arms around himself. It took all her willpower for Phil to stop himself from hugging him. Instead, he grabbed his elbow and carefully pulled a bit closer so Tommy could curl up in the chair again. He seemed much smaller then, and it was easier to remember that no matter what he said, he was still just a child.

"Of course it doesn't matter. But, Tommy... It *did* matter. For *you* ." He leaned down so he could meet the boy's eyes, but gave up when the boy looked away a second time. Instead, he straightened up to give him a little more space. "When you got to me, you were convinced your mom would come back. You wanted to go back to her. It took several weeks for you to realize that it would never happen. And I still remember how much you cried back then." He winced at the mere mention of a sleepy little boy repeating over and over to take him to his mother. "And it wasn't my job to tell you there was nothing to despair about, because you would be better off with us, or that your mother was a monster, and the sooner you forget

about her, the better. I could..." He hesitated, but finally capitulated. "I could have said that to Wilbur once or twice," he admitted. "And I could say something like that to Techno. Definitely more than once. Because they both needed to hear it to understand that not all people are like that. That these are only the worst cases, and they had the misfortune to meet them in a lot of their lives." He reached up to his fair hair, smiling slightly when Tommy didn't pull away or shake his hand away. Instead, he raised his head a little and finally looked at him with large, wet eyes. "You didn't need to hear that some people shouldn't come close to children at all. You just wanted your mom back. Because you didn't know anything else. And you still loved her, despite everything."

Tommy rested his chin on his pulled up knees.

"Because she was my mom..." he said softly, as if only now some hazy, distant memory had returned to him. But immediately he shook his head, sniffed again and straightened proudly. "I'm not a child anymore," he assured him, completely denying it. "You don't have to... Be careful with me like that."

Phil smiled as he ran his fingers through his hair, just the same way as he did when Tommy fell asleep against his side halfway through the story he was reading. He could have sworn it was only a month or two ago...

"You'll always be my little boy," he said, bending down to finally pull his child towards him, as he should have done from the very beginning.

It wasn't the most comfortable position possible. In fact, Phil was sure his back would hurt after too long and his legs would go numb. But Tommy immediately clung to him with such desperation that he probably wouldn't have been able to pull himself out of the embrace if he had wanted to.

And he didn't even try, taught by experience. If he wanted to, Tommy could be like a little koala clinging to the last tree of the world. Whether he was actually sad or just trying to evade from the bath or doing homework, he held on tightly and stubbornly.

"And Techno said," he once started, stalling to keep himself from being thrown into bed, "that if he ever meets his mom, he wants her to have a stroke."

Phil froze for a moment, but quickly decided that no, he wouldn't be thinking about it now or going into details. It was almost nine o'clock and Tommy should have been asleep for a good hour, meanwhile he remained energetic, radiant as a little sun, and was enjoying himself by putting his patience to the test.

"Techno is a bit dramatic," he just said, sitting down on the bed with the kid still hanging around his neck. Tommy wasn't stupid, he knew full well that if he let go even for a moment, he would end up under the covers before he could blink.

"What's a stroke?"

"Um... When your legs go numb and you smell burned toast."

"Ah." Tommy nodded, satisfied with the very detailed and medically correct explanation. "Okay. Do you think we can really meet his mom someday?"

This time Phil hesitated, on one hand not wanting to lie, on the other trying to avoid further questions.

"I hope not," he said finally, and Tommy just leaned over so he could look him straight in the eye.

"You don't want her to have a stroke, do you?" He asked almost indignantly. Phil made a mental note to talk to his older son about what is worth saying to a six-year-old and what is better not to. He pinned it right next to dozens of similar ones.

"I don't want Techno to remember unpleasant things," he explained, turning so he could lie on his back. The bed was way too small for an adult, and he had promised himself not to lie down with Tommy, so as not to develop bad habits for him, but screw it, one time couldn't hurt anyone.

Tommy seemed to agree, because he smiled like only small gremlins can and shifted to settle comfortably with his head against Phil's chest. He yawned widely, but anyone who had known him for more than two days knew it was just a deception and would fight the sleepiness until he finally collapsed from exhaustion.

"Do you think we can meet my mom too?" He asked after a moment, much quieter and more deliberately than before. His hand tightened a little tighter on Phil's T-shirt, as if he needed to make sure Phil was still here and not going anywhere.

Phil wasn't sure what hurt more - just the question or the fact that he had no idea what an answer would be right in the child's eyes.

"I can't promise you we won't," he risked finally, wrapping his arm around the boy, stroking his hair with the other hand. Tommy sighed softly, but it was hard to judge if he was more relieved or disappointed. After a while, he raised his head and, propped on his hands, looked down at his father.

"But if we do, you'll hold me tight, okay?" He asked so seriously that Phil blinked in surprise. "Very tight. In case I want to run to her."

Phil was sure he must look damn stupid as he lay silently on a bed that was far too small, trying his best to pull himself together, retain the last dignity and not cry.

"Of course," he finally promised, and Tommy, completely relieved by it, settled back comfortably with his head on his chest and let him hug him even tighter than before. "I won't let go for even a moment."

He didn't go back to his bedroom that night, and it's hard to say he was actually asleep, rather he was staring at the ceiling, thinking about way too many things at once, running his fingers through his kid's fair hair and praying that no one would ever put that promise to the test. .

"I don't want to see her," Tommy whispered, a little older, a little bigger, and still clinging to him with exactly the same desperation. "I don't even want to remember her."

Phil rocked him slightly before leaning in to kiss his hair. He couldn't remember the last time Tommy hadn't insisted he was too old to be cuddled.

"I know."

The boy sniffed and, still clutching his shirt tightly, leaned back a little so he could meet his eyes.

"But you want me to remember," he said more than asked, in a tone of reproach and resentment.

Phil sighed heavily, first silently and then aloud.

"It's not like that," he assured, though, when he thought about it now, there might actually be some truth in it. "It's my fault. I pushed too much. I should be glad that you can already judge that someone was not good for you. I should be glad you didn't miss her anymore. I know I should." He hesitated, not really knowing how to explain when exactly all this knowledge ceased to matter and why he stubbornly ignored it despite all signs in heaven and earth. Eventually, when the silence began to become uncomfortable, he opted for plain honesty.

"You know... My family helped me a lot once, when I needed it the most. But we've never been close to each other and at some point we just... I guess we just stopped talking to each other, like, really talking. I wanted to be independent, do what I like. It was my decision," he emphasized. "And I never felt bad for it, not enough to change my mind. But I didn't expect that sometimes... Sometimes it's really hard to be all alone."

Funnily enough, saying it aloud for the first time in his life, although it was a bit of a relief, didn't convey how he actually felt. How gloomy and painfully quiet the house had been on the first Christmas he spent all alone, how stupid it felt to catch himself talking to himself more and more, only to hear someone else's voice, how sometimes he would stay at work long hours just to keep him from having to face the thought that no one was waiting for him. He knew that he had chosen this life for himself, and that if he really wanted to, he could still go back, he could try again. But he didn't want to rely on others forever, he didn't want to force himself into a family that was never entirely his and where he always felt more like a guest. And the guests, in the long run, became tedious and irritating. Of the two evils, he preferred to withdraw alone and leave behind good memories, rather than wait for everyone to wince at the mere sight of him.

Tommy frowned and tense again.

"I'm not alone," he said, firmly and firmly, but his eyes flashed with the first flicker of anxiety. "I have you. And Wilbur and Techno. I have you."

Phil smiled as he stroked his back reassuringly.

"Of course. You are my baby, Tommy. Whether we are related or not, you will always be my son. But I want you to remember that it's okay if you feel different yourself. Regardless of everything, we will never be your biological family. We will always try to be your real one." He stressed, feeling the boy's hands tighten a little tighter on his shirt. "But it's okay if you want a family outside of us too."

Tommy didn't answer right away, just staring at him closely for a long moment, and Phil couldn't help feeling that he had just disappointed this little boy who asked to never let him go.

"I don't want to see her," he said finally, and this time there was no anger or even sheer stubbornness in it. Only pure, childlike despair. "Please don't make me see her."

Phil couldn't answer that except by hugging him tightly.

"I won't force you to do anything," he promised, hearing the first louder sniff. "I promise I won't. I never wanted to. But I'm so..." He embraced his child even tighter, feeling that he too is slowly going to cry. "I am so scared that I will lose you, no matter what you choose. I'm scared you'll change your mind. I'm scared someday you'll regret not giving her a second chance. That you'll meet her someday, in a few years, and she'll be better than you remember. And she will have good reasons, lots of good reasons, and will explain everything well enough for you to forgive her. And you'll be angry that you didn't do it sooner." He took a breath, and the air vibrated unpleasantly in his throat. "And I'm scared you'll blame me for it."

Before Tommy came into their lives, Phil had never considered how bad he was at his job. When he first registered as a foster father, he made it clear in advance that he was very serious about potential adoption and that he sees himself as a permanent caregiver rather than a temporary home. Nate, whatever you say about him, actually took it to heart (and even abused it a bit) and adjusted to the expectations. Both Wilbur and Techno had a clear legal status, no family member waited in line to claim them, and all three of them could calmly focus on slowly learning how to create a family together. Phil really believed he was doing great. He was sure as hell that he was doing exactly what he was supposed to do, exactly as it should be done.

Looking after Tommy very quickly and painfully corrected him. He could be a good guardian, he could try to be a good father - but he was a terrible foster parent, and he couldn't figure out how he hadn't noticed it sooner. How could he possibly assume that he would be able to take a child under his roof and not love him with all his heart on the spot, when exactly that had happened twice already. How could he think he would be able to spend weeks with Tommy, see how the boy glowed at the sight of him, how he clung to him with confidence, how without hesitation he began to trust him - and he would not want to keep him forever. He knew he had made a bloody big mistake. He had known this from the moment Tommy ran down the stairs the first morning and stopped at the kitchen door with a very dramatic sigh, comically amazed that they hadn't actually left him home alone. He knew this when he purposefully walked around four stores in search of a bedside lamp that looked a little like a bee. He knew it when Tommy first called him dad and when he tried to explain to him why he couldn't do it.

But he was an adult, and grown-ups take responsibility for their mistakes and put their children's welfare ahead of their own, no matter how much it breaks their hearts. Tommy was never meant to stay, never meant to be 'forever'. So Phil did exactly what he thought was best for everyone. And maybe he had more than a bad memory left behind. Maybe he had become a little paranoid, maybe subconsciously he was still afraid that someone would ask for his son at any moment and try to take him away. Maybe some of these fears mingled in some strange, uncontrolled way with his own experiences. For whatever reason, he couldn't help but think that he would never be enough, his family would never be enough.

Tommy stiffened in his arms and then stepped out of them to be able to look at him in a way that made it very clear that he didn't understand too much of the speech.

"You think she'll be great someday, I'll forgive her everything and I'll have a grudge against you for letting me call her a mean bitch?" He assured himself, making a face as if the idea itself was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. Which meant a lot for someone who had spent years under one roof with Wilbur.

Phil had to take a moment to make sure his voice wouldn't crack again.

"Something like that, yes," he admitted. "I don't want you to accuse me of making you lose her a second time because of me."

Tommy frowned, and for a moment, for a few seconds, he thought deeply about something, as if the gravity of the situation had really gotten to him. And then, very in his own style, he looked exactly the same as when someone reminded him of the importance of school and good grades.

"But that's stupid," he said ruthlessly. "Fucking bullshit. It makes no sense at all." He looked at his father reprovingly. "Old people should be smarter, what the fuck?"

Phil laughed, though it sounded a little hysterical even to himself.

"I'm not that old."

Tommy opened his mouth, probably to insist quite automatically that yes, he is very, very old and has one foot in the grave, but he suddenly changed his mind, pursed his lips in a narrow line and moved a little lower in the chair, hunched and pulling my knees high under my chin.

"I thought you didn't want me anymore," he confessed, much, much more quietly. "That you were counting a little on my mom to take me back after all."

If Phil hadn't just had a little nervous breakdown, he would probably have one right now, hearing the hesitation in his child's voice.

"Never," he said, trying to put enough confidence in it so that his son would never forget it again and never have any doubts. "I would never give you back. You're mine, no matter what."

Tommy didn't seem entirely convinced.

"Techno said I'm annoying," he muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. It made him look much more like the sulky gremlin Phil saw every day, which was perhaps why he hesitated to answer.

"I don't want to worry you, but Techno always says that," he joked, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "About you and Wilbur. And I suspect, that about me too."

The corners of the boy's mouth lifted slightly, but then he returned to being a teenager misunderstood by the whole world.

"But he was serious now," he grunted, winding a loose thread on his sleeve with his finger, staring absolutely everywhere but at his father. "That I was terrible. And that it upsets you too."

It was hard not to find in this flash of self-awareness and a certain reconciliation with the facts. Even harder: disagreeing with him. After all, Tommy could be annoying, he could be fucking obnoxious, long before he actually had a reason for it, and Phil was starting to lose patience with him.

"He's so... so absolutely unbearable sometimes," he confided not more than a week ago, taking up Bad's couch, and not hiding the fact that yes, he only visited him to complain. And a bit of fear that if he spends another second alone with his child, he will have one less son.

Darryl, as befits a good friend, nodded sympathetically without trying to interrupt him. Skeppy, much less sneaky about the fact that they had plans for the evening that had been ruined by an unannounced visit, looked up from his phone to glare at him.

"Tell me more," he snorted. Apparently, he was still a bit annoyed after he had to pick up Sapnap from the police station after he got into a fight to defend the honor of his 'fiancé'. Phil never asked which one in particular.

"He's smart," he continued, completely ignoring both the cut-in and his slowly cooling tea. "And funny. And most of the time, I can't imagine him not being with us. But sometimes I want to put him up for sale or give him to the zoo. And he doesn't leave his room at all!" Instead of calming himself down he gradually got more and more angry. "He comes back from school, eats and that's all I see him! He won't even sit with me for a second! And it's impossible to get along with him at all, I talk to him, but it's like talking to the wall. And I can practically hear him rolling his eyes."

He rubbed his hands over his face, taking a deep breath and holding it for a moment, just like he'd been doing ten times a day lately, to somehow keep his nerves in check. Bad offered him a sugar bowl and was not even surprised when half of its contents ended up in the already cold tea.

"So... He's acting like most teenagers?" He made sure, as if he wasn't listening to what his friend had been lecturing to him for the last ten minutes and didn't understand the seriousness of the problem at all.

Phil took a sip of his tea, grimaced, and added some more sugar.

"Wilbur and Techno weren't like that. Well, Wilbur, maybe. But even he didn't... talk back so much, and everything."

Bad nodded again, but this time slower and as if without conviction.

"And it's not like," he began, choosing his words carefully, "that Tommy is just... Well..."

"Normal," said Skeppy, still not even looking at them. "Just normal."

Even if he couldn't see it, Phil glared at him anyway.

"All my kids are normal, fuck you."

"Language," Darryl instructed, to which no one paid the slightest attention.

Skeppy still preferred the virtual world over the real one, which didn't prevent him, however, from speaking his mind.

"Yeah. But it was never so obvious from Tommy that something was wrong. He's so... Mostly only yours." He shrugged. "It's logical, that he's not afraid to talk back to you. Hardly anyone would be afraid."

Phil frowned.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you don't have a backbone and can't be firm."

No matter how deeply hurt and betrayed he felt, Phil had a feeling there might be a little bit of a point in this and he shouldn't insist too much on his own.

"Techno and Wilbur didn't have that problem," he only muttered, and Skeppy gave a loud, almost amused cluck.

"Yeah. Because someone else had taught them respect before you," he snorted. Then, when the living room went completely quiet, he put down the phone for the first time and looked in their direction, his hands raised up defensively. "Okay, I could have overdone it a bit."

Phil forced himself to swallow all the words that were already on his lips that Bad would not be pleased with.

"A bit," he said, resentfully, but as much as he didn't want to think about it, despite all his anger, he had to admit that there was something in that statement that was hard to ignore and forget. Some very uncomfortable truth, which he always avoided, because it felt bad and mean to even glance in its direction.

No matter how much he disavowed that fact, Skeppy was right to some extent. Of course, it was impossible to say that when his boys came under his roof they were well-mannered and taught to be polite, rather intimidated and trained. Even that was quite enough, however, to make caring for them more like taming than teaching them any rules. Upbringing Wilbur was

largely based on reassuring him that he was safe, that he had the right to be loud, the right to ask questions, the right to be sad or angry, and to be completely open about it. Upbringing Techno - by constantly reminding him that he's loved, accepted and irreplaceable, that the family needs him as much as he needs them and that he will always have a place in it, no matter what.

If Phil had somehow done at least some of his job well, Tommy had grown up well aware of all of these things. Just as he sensed perfectly that he was the favorite of absolutely everyone, no matter how much his brothers would deny it, and if he only whined long enough and asked nicely enough, sooner or later he would get whatever he wanted.

And maybe that was the problem. Maybe Phil had just missed the point where he should start saying no, be a little more consistent, a little more firm. Maybe he had focused too much on the fact that Tommy was still clinging to him with the same childlike trust to notice when his remarks began to be ignored and the rules were violated with full deliberation. Maybe he remembered a little too well how terrified his sons could be at times, to care that Tommy barely noticed the sharper tone and the disappointed gaze. Maybe he was convinced that if something worked once, if it worked a second time, it must work a third time.

Tommy was none of his brothers. He was a good kid, smart, funny, sincere and absolutely lost in what he's allowed and how much he can get by bending the rules.

Because Phil never taught him that. And he didn't even realize it until someone remarked it to his face.

A few people, to be exact. Including his own son. Phil had no idea if it was a sign that he had done something right, at least in Techno's case, or not. All he knew was that he would never dare to ask.

"Sometimes, yes," he finally admitted, breaking his last resistance. "You get annoying sometimes, that's true. Just like your brothers. And me too, probably."

Tommy looked at him uncertainly, as if trying to judge if the atmosphere had actually relaxed a bit.

"Some of your rules are stupid," he said, apparently concluding that he could afford a little more after all.

Phil exhaled slowly.

"Okay. Some probably are," he agreed diplomatically. "But we can always talk about it, take it easy. And I wouldn't be offended if you would spend an evening with me every now and then. I know I'm more boring than Tubbo and Ranboo, but I miss you."

Tommy blinked, perhaps a little surprised by the confession, and slowly dropped his legs to the floor, moving a little closer.

"You're no more boring than Ranboo," he said, and Phil raised his eyebrows, trying not to laugh.

"But more boring than Tubbo?"

"Yes," the boy nodded solemnly. And then he thought deeply about something. "If I don't like something, should I tell you?"

"Yhm."

"And will you actually listen to me?"

Phil was sure he would regret this decision, but he didn't expect it that soon.

"I'm beginning to think it was a bad idea after all..."

Tommy completely ignored it and just straightened, chin twitching.

"I want a dog."

Ah, yeah. Because more pocket money or later bedtime wouldn't be a sufficient request.

"Tommy..."

"But that's not fair! Only I don't have a pet! Techno has his dumb rabbits, and Wilbur has Milo... What about me?"

Phil could give him a whole bunch of very good reasons and draw a whole diagram explaining point by point why the last thing he needs right now is a puppy that someone will have to walk, feed, and train. And that someone wouldn't be Tommy. He could try to be firm on the subject and explain that Milo never peed on the floor and that Fluff was an "emotionally supportive animal" and he only got the company because no one had informed them about how rabbits were gregarious before purchase. Anyway, both piles of fluff were jumping around the dorm room right now, and Phil didn't have to worry about them trying to chew cables again.

For the time being, however, he didn't have much strength and willingness for longer discussions.

"You got a nephew. It's almost the same," he just said, with all seriousness and no indifference. "In a few weeks you'll be able to teach him to sit down, and then even how to apparate."

As planned, Tommy was too shocked to argue further.

"I'll tell Wilbur you said so," he only threatened, after staring at his father for a long time, as if he wasn't sure if he was serious or not.

Phil shrugged.

"You have no evidence."

Deep down he suspected that Tommy didn't need any excuse to run to his brother for a complaint, bending the facts and dramatizing everything else. So he was a little surprised when the boy didn't even move from his seat and continued to look at him closely as if he was looking for something.

"You're still sad," he finally said, almost triumphantly.

Phil frowned.

"I'm not," he said, but Tommy, as was his habit, was already insisting on something and had no plans to yield.

"You are," he repeated with even more emphasis. "I see you are."

Under different circumstances, Phil might have tried to argue a little longer. But they were just talking really honestly for the first time in a long, long time, and he didn't want to spoil it right away.

"I am, a bit," he admitted, sighing heavily while Tommy smiled victoriously.

"Wilbur was right. You always give up the second time."

Well, of course...

"Wilbur has to stop teaching you strange things," he muttered, knowing in advance that it was just wishful thinking. But then he looked at his youngest child, with his ever tousled hair and still red eyes, and felt something painfully tighten around his heart. "I'm sorry."

Tommy was definitely not what he expected and stopped smiling immediately.

"For what?" He asked, which was an obvious and natural reaction, but for some reason Phil was hoping that maybe they would just skip this step and never have to actually explain. As always, his kids just couldn't show a little pity and let him go for once.

"You know my parents are dead, right?"

"Yhm." Tommy nodded, his eyes hardening slightly. "But I thought they were okay. You always said they were."

Phil smiled, a bit affectionate by the protectiveness emanating from his child. Tommy had always been very much like his brothers in this respect, and he didn't seem to be fully aware of it.

"They were," he reassured him. "They were more than okay. And sometimes..." He hesitated, his hand instinctively clenched on his forearm, right where the long, ugly scar still stretched. "I still miss them a lot sometimes. Especially since I have you and your brothers. They would love to pamper you. I wish they had more time. That I had no more time for them. I guess I accidentally transferred that to you. I didn't want you to regret it later. I didn't want to take it from you."

He didn't add that he thought about it a lot more since the older boys had moved out and the house had gotten a little quieter, a little too quiet, too much like a time when he had nobody to go back to. He didn't add that with Fundy in his arms he was thinking of his father listening to Wilbur's guitar and his mother, who loved books almost as much as Techno did. He didn't add that, watching his sons receive their high school diplomas, he felt a little jealous that years before he had no one really close to him that day to wave to from the stage.

But maybe he didn't have to say it aloud at all, and maybe Tommy was a little smarter and more prescient than he had suspected him because he wasn't trying to ask or judge. He just was silent for a moment, giving him some time, then, as if nothing had happened, he pulled the chair closer and pushed the notebooks to the farthest corner of his desk.

"Want to watch me play Minecraft?" He asked, already turning on the computer as if the answer was obvious. Because maybe it really was.

Phil laughed, trying to sneak a wipe from his eyes.

"Just watch?" He feigned resentment to tease him a little. "I didn't even deserve for you to let me on your server?"

Tommy wrinkled his nose and scratched his chin, pretending to think intensely.

"I would consider it if you defeat the dragon for me," he decided at last, in the tone of a gracious prince. But he immediately became serious and looked at his father almost regretfully. "Hey. As I said you weren't my real father, it wasn't really that. I mean, it was, but not like that."

Phil would never admit how badly he needed to hear that. Apparently, it wasn't just the kids who needed a reminder at times.

"I know."

Tommy looked unconvinced.

"You're real," he assured me with a little more emphasis. "Seriously. You are."

"I know," he repeated, and only then did the boy relax a bit.

"But don't tell Techno I said so," he asked, making the same face that always guaranteed him the biggest piece of dessert. "He'll kill me."

Deep down, Phil thought Tommy deserved a few more minutes of fear and remorse. But he wouldn't be himself if he hadn't been broken and he hadn't succumbed, hugging the boy with his arm and kissing the top of his head as he protested.

Two sons happy, one more to go.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

@Katricea helped me a lot with it. Pog!

Chapter Notes

The final boss

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

No matter how nice it was to finally spend some time with his youngest, especially when he was in a good mood and didn't take offense every second, Phil couldn't quite enjoy the moment. Not when he still remembered Wilbur's face as they passed each other in the corridor, his frightened gaze and tense shoulders, as if he were afraid to even breathe loudly.

Of all the boys, Wilbur was the one who would always think that he had done something wrong and that someone might be angry with him. It was hardly surprising, since most of his childhood all his being punished or not being depended on whether he would behave 'appropriately' or not do anything 'wrong', didn't frown at someone, didn't answer in the wrong tone. No wonder all negative emotions were associated with immediate rejection, and it took a long time for Phil to convince him that normal parents didn't stop loving their kids just because their new shoes got dirty. Although gods know that the world wouldn't end if he didn't jump into every puddle he met...

Getting rid of habits once acquired was rarely easy. Especially those very literally beat into his head. But Wilbur had always been a bright boy, sensitive and understanding more than everyone thought. Phil really believed they were on the right track. That at some point new memories had obliterated the trauma enough to replace reflexes with common sense. Wilbur knew he was loved. He knew no one in their family would ever hurt him. He knew he didn't need to be scared, and even if he crossed the thin, invisible line at any point, even if Phil was really annoyed, at worst he would hear a few harsher words.

Phil believed it until such a situation actually took place and he had the opportunity to see in practice how much he overestimated the possibilities of the human psyche.

He remembered that when Techno knocked at his office in the evening, all those years ago, he was wearing not only thick socks, but also slippers, although he had never been convinced to wear any of these things before. He also already took a bath, was in pajamas, with his hair thoroughly dried, which, again, virtually never happened, because he must have had a serious

blow-dryer accident in his previous lifetime, judging by the passion with which he hated them. In a word, he presented himself like a very polite, calm child. Which in itself was perfect proof that he was still remorseful and was trying to cover up the bad impression.

If Phil were still not nervous after a few hours of stress, running around town and digesting the news that his sons really found a night trip to the lake a brilliant idea, he might even have thought it was worth it.

Techno didn't speak right away, nor did he respond to a smile, instead looking away and nervously biting his lip.

"It's bad to snitch on someone, isn't it?" He asked finally, which was so unrelated to anything Phil expected to hear that for a moment he didn't know how to react.

"It depends," he finally replied, slowly and thoughtfully. On the one hand, he wanted to raise his children to respect the law. On the other hand, sometimes it was better, easier and safer to pretend that you didn't see anything. "If you hear Wilbur and Schlatt whispering to each other in class, it's a bit mean to tell the teacher. But if you see someone bullying or hurting someone, you should tell someone about it." He pulled the second, vacant chair closer and nodded for Techno to take a seat. The kid needed no more encouragement, immediately sitting, pressing his back hard against the backrest. "Something happen at school?"

Techno was silent again for a moment, even more tense than before, if possible, but finally shook his head.

"No, but... It's about Wilbur," he confessed. "And... And about yesterday. Because he was really scared. Not so much later, I took care of him." He straightened, clearly proud of the exemplary fulfillment of his older brother's duties, but then winced again. "But at first he panicked and then he cried that you would never forgive him for sure and that you hated him now and all that... And I told him it was bullshit because I pissed you off before and you didn't do anything to me. But he got even more scared and said he wished you would just hit him and then it would be normal again afterwards. And he wanted to go tell you, but I told him to keep quiet and not do anything stupid."

Phil was sure he had forgotten how to breathe for a long time, because even when he finally managed to breathe in loudly, it felt as if his body didn't know what to do with it. He could only concentrate and think about his child and how he had pushed him off the night before, literally and figuratively, and had left him alone because he couldn't contain his own emotions.

Logically, he knew that he had a right to that moment only for himself. That he had done the right thing by trying to calm down first instead of acting in anger. But that one brief moment when he looked at his child and thought that Wilbur fully deserved this fear and doubt, that he deserved to feel a little bit as horrible as Phil had felt in the last few hours... He wasn't sure if he would ever forgive himself for it, not now that he realized how many old wounds he had to scratch with it.

"Oh," he sighed finally, not sure what else to say. "Oh. Techno..."

The boy nodded as if he understood perfectly in spite of everything. Which didn't stop him from speaking any further.

"And earlier, when you went to our school, for that parents' meeting, I..." He paused and turned his head, making a face as if he already regretted starting the topic at all. "Because I was nervous," he muttered defensively, pulling his knees high under his chin. "And- And I was a little scared. Because I'm not like Wilbur and I don't know how to be smart when everyone else is just yelling at me."

Phil nodded, happy that something wasn't his fault after all.

"No wonder. I wouldn't be able to focus either."

"Exactly." Techno straightened up a bit, pleased to be agreed with him. "But I was nervous and Wilbur wanted to cheer me up and he said that even if you get angry, you won't send me away anyway, and- And I said I don't care, because if you even touch me, I run out of here and you won't see me again." He blurted out with one exhalation and then louder and, as if to justify, added: "Well, because I was stressed." He frowned, deeply thinking about something. "But it's still true."

Phil wasn't quite sure if he should care more about the fact that his child still saw the monster in him at times, one of those that had surrounded him so far, or rather be glad that the boy was clearly able to explain to himself that at times he didn't think fully rationally. For safety, he chose the third option and leaned forward in the chair so he could ruffle the boy's hair. He smiled when the latter didn't flinch or grimace.

"I know. That is a good approach," he praised. "Well, maybe apart from running away from home. But a call to Nate, absolutely."

"Yes!" Techno lifted his chin high, clearly pleased that someone appreciated his will to survive. "Well, I think so too! And Wilbur said it was stupid and that he would stay and..." He hesitated, moving back a little lower in the chair again. "And I know you wouldn't hurt him. But it's probably not good for him to want to stay. I don't want him to want to be hurt. Even so..." He waved his hand in the air, searching for a good word. "So not really."

"Hypothetically," Phil prompted automatically, his thoughts far away. Somewhere where he could, in peace and quiet, curse loudly his own stupidity and naivety. "Techno. Thank you for telling me about this."

The boy shifted uneasily.

"So am I right?" He made sure, and it took Phil a moment to realize that he was not asking for reassurance that his brother wouldn't be hurt. He felt a little better to see that at least one child took the point for granted. At least temporarily.

"You're right," he admitted. "Wilbur... Well, Wilbur has always wanted to feel loved. Everyone does," he added quickly. "But he tried a little too hard and let others take advantage of it."

Techno looked at him closely, analyzing each word one at a time, before he finally decided he liked their general meanings, as he slipped off his chair and slowly, still a little shyly, stretched his hands up. It took it exactly a second for Phil to understand and pull him into his lap, hugging him tightly.

"And will you talk to him?" He heard when the child rested his cheek on his shoulder. "Tell him to stop?"

"I'll talk to him," he promised, kissing his hair, still slightly damp and smelling of shampoo. "You're a good brother, you know?"

Techno just snorted softly, but his ears reddened slightly.

„Yeah. I know.”

Sometimes Phil regretted being a single father. Not being a parent, God forbid - but the lack of another person to whom he could shift at least some of his duties, especially the less pleasant and heartbreaking ones. And that conversation with Wilbur, unfortunately, was one of them, as painful as it was for both of them.

Though the boy definitely wished it never happened.

"So you want me to run away from you?" He almost squealed, staring at his father with wide eyes. He was already stressed when Phil came to his room, and now he was openly trying to squeeze into the wall, as if hoping to find a crack between the bricks, squeeze through it, and scurry into the unknown.

Phil tried not to take this ever-growing distance personally and to stick to what he had already settled in his head. Even if he needed all his willpower not to hold the boy in a hug and make sure that everything was fine, he was safe, he didn't have to worry about anything and they didn't have to talk about anything unpleasant, never again. Wilbur had to understand that he deserved much, much more than he had been offered before. And sometimes the only way to understand our own worth was to accept that some people were deliberately trying to take it away from us.

"I want you to remember that sometimes... Sometimes we get hurt by people we care a lot about. And then it's very difficult to remember that you have to defend yourself," he said, not for a second stopping his gaze at the boy, but not trying to close the distance between them. "People who hurt others are not worth staying with them. Even if we love them very much."

Wilbur's lips twitched, his eyes glazed over, and he suddenly threw himself across the length of the bed, into the arms Phil had reached out to him at the last moment.

"But I don't want to go anywhere," he sobbed, hugging his father so tightly as if he expected someone to try to pull him away at any moment. Or perhaps that he would be pushed back again. "You promised I could stay! You promised! I'm sorry about the phone, I'm really, so sorry, so sorry-"

Phil rocked him lightly, stroking his back soothingly as the words fused into one incomprehensible sob.

"I know you're sorry," he said, taking advantage of the moment when Wilbur had to finally gasp. "And I would never give you to anyone. You are my child, I love you and I'll never let anyone take you from me," he promised, and the boy glanced at him uneasily, sniffed sadly, and then coughed as he tried to wipe his wet cheeks. Phil handed him a tissue waiting patiently for him to calm down a bit. He put a hand on his back, feeling it moving up and down in time with his breathing until he finally felt the child relax a little and rest his cheek against his chest.

"It's not that I want to give you to someone, Wilbur. Not for your call, nor for your entire... adventure. And you didn't do anything wrong," he added quickly, feeling the flesh tighten in his embrace. "But I'm worried that sometimes... Sometimes you think hurting someone is the right thing to do."

Wilbur's head jerked up immediately, his hands resting on his chest.

"Not at all!" He was indignant so much that it would be really hard not to believe in his honesty. "I don't think so! I didn't do anything to anyone! Even Dream!"

Phil postponed the comment that, however annoying it was, Dream really didn't deserve this 'even'. Although, in truth, he didn't believe it a bit himself.

"But you wanted me to hurt you," he remarked, and Wilbur immediately opened his mouth to protest. But then he closed it, his shoulders dropped, his eyes held a strange, vague embarrassment, and then he pushed his face into his father's sweater again.

"I just wanted you to stop being angry," he muttered.

Phil hummed in understanding as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"I'll stop getting angry without it. But sometimes I need a little more time."

Wilbur made a hollow grunt, still hiding from the world.

"I wish you didn't. I don't like you being angry with me."

If he hadn't known Wilbur's past, Phil would probably have found it a perfectly normal confession, much less embarrassing and childish than the boy thought. Unfortunately, he had the opportunity not only to read his files, but also to personally see that they didn't cover even one percent of all the harm and painful memories caused.

"I know. I don't think anyone likes it. But it doesn't work that way, Wilbur. Some people need to be alone for a while to calm down."

The boy sniffed again sadly.

"Like Techno," he noted, and Phil smiled, relieved that they were finally starting to move in the right direction.

"Yhm. And like me yesterday. It doesn't mean that we'll never talk to you again, or that we hate you. It's just... Sometimes we're just too angry with someone to talk to them right now and we need a break from them. And we do it just to avoid accidentally hurting them."

Wilbur straightened, wiped his nose, and sat on the bed with a soft pat.

"Techno sometimes says mean things when he's angry."

"Techno is still a kid. He's still learning to deal with emotions, just like you."

The boy frowned in deep thought.

"He's always sorry after that."

"Yhm. Exactly. Because he only said something because he was angry and he never wanted to hurt anyone. Yesterday, I didn't want to hurt you either. I didn't want to say something mean or yell at you anymore. But I knew it would be difficult for me without being alone for a while."

Wilbur looked at him hopefully, then looked away.

"And you didn't stop loving me?" He asked, softly, uncertainly, and with such urgency that Phil would never be able to forgive himself if he didn't answer her immediately.

"Never," he assured, cupping the baby's face in his hands, his thumbs wiping his still wet cheeks. "Wilbur." He waited a moment for the boy to look him straight in the eye. "Don't let yourself get hurt. No matter who it is or how angry they are at you. This is not a healthy way to deal with problems."

Wilbur snuggled tightly against him, his hands clenched tightly on his sweater.

"And if someone doesn't forgive me for a long time?" He asked almost in a whisper, and Phil found himself unable to answer. Not in a way that is both real and satisfying at the same time.

"Sometimes people don't forgive others at all," he said finally. "You have no right to try to make them do it. You can only sincerely apologize and wait for what they decide to do about it."

He knew it wasn't the nicest truth to accept, but it surprised him anyway when Wilbur inhaled sharply, lifted his head, and looked at him with such ineffable, boundless despair as he had never seen in him before.

"What if I do something you won't forgive me for? Like, never again?" He whimpered, raising his hands to hug his father's neck as if he needed some physical proof that nothing like this has happened yet, that he is still loved and wanted. "What will happen then?"

Phil didn't hesitate, letting his legs hug his waist.

"There are very, very few things that I could never forgive you. And I know you and I know that none of them will ever happen," he replied, sure of it like nothing else in the world.

"You're a good kid, Wilbur." He kissed his hair, then smiled a little teasingly. "Though a little inconsiderate sometimes, yes."

Wilbur cringed even tighter, as if trying to show that he was too small and cute to be angry with him anymore.

"I'm glad Techno told you," he said after a moment, swayed slightly in his father's embrace. "But don't tell him I cried, okay?"

Phil smiled as he rested his chin on the top of his head.

"Not a word."

In retrospect, he resented himself for letting his vigilance lull so easily after that conversation. That he was naive enough to believe that one conversation could solve a problem he never even got to, not really. But Wilbur deserved to be confident, to grow up knowing his worth and never doubting that he was loved and had someone to turn to for help. The thought that there was always a little doubt in him would be too painful to live with every day, but displacing it never really changed anything.

Just like telling himself that he was just giving them both time to cool down now didn't change the fact that Phil was simply afraid of the conversation. He was afraid to hear why his child didn't come to him right away, what did he do to lose his trust? At what point did everything go wrong? Did he miss something, give his son too much freedom? How was he supposed to ask all of this if he was still not sure if he really wanted to hear the answer? How was he to support his child if he still had resentment and anger, because this was not how he planned it all and it was not meant to be like this. Wilbur deserved to be a child a little longer, he deserved to be able to enjoy his youth in peace, to be carefree and try new things.

But he was always quick-tempered and liked challenges, so perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that he chose the most binding mistake from the very start.

Regardless of all of this, no matter what they thought about it or whether they were ready for it, each individually and together as a family, Fundy existed. He appeared in their lives and was going to stay there whether they continued to avoid each other or finally talked.

Once upon a time, years before, Phil had made a promise to himself that he would never ignore his children when they asked for help, no matter how strange or stupid the reason might be. And he really tried to stick to his word, even though looking for monsters in the closet and under the bed for the third time a week wasn't his favorite thing to do at three in the morning.

And now he wasn't going to break his word either, even if, frankly speaking, he probably would have preferred the monsters of the two evil ones.

When Tommy finally grew bored of building family ties and made very little subtle hints that he was going to call Tubbo and didn't want any witnesses, Phil was much more determined. He had a plan, he meant well, he had a lot of good will - everything had to work out and go as planned.

Wilbur must have been talking to someone on the phone because from behind the door of his room his voice came low but clearly irritated, clearly one that he would never use on Fundy. Indeed, when Phil knocked a moment later and opened the door a bit, the infant was sleeping soundly in the crib, legs tucked into the blanket and a tiny fist clenched over the paw of a teddy fox. Wilbur, standing in the middle of the room, was a much less charming sight: his clothes were clean and he had finally combed his hair, but he still had an aura of resignation and weariness. He probably hadn't had much sleep that night and Phil felt a shot of pity at the mere sight of him, so much so that at the last moment he stopped himself from approaching him, hugging him and expressing his sympathy out loud and very openly.

Instead he cleared his throat and closed the door behind him.

"Everything all right?" He asked, glancing at the phone Wilbur was still clutching in his hand, as if he were going to throw it angrily against the floor. In fact, Phil wouldn't feel sorry for his cell phone. It hadn't been of much use in the last few months anyway.

Wilbur blinked, glanced down as if he had just figured out what he was doing, and hurriedly slipped the phone into his pocket.

"Yhm," he muttered, walking over to the bed and sitting on it with such a swing that it creaked. Maybe it wasn't ready for such a burden of reality either. "Schlatt... he asked if I had time to meet." He rolled his eyes. "As if it wasn't obvious."

He tried to say it with a mockery, as if he was amused by his friend's thoughtlessness, but there was still something more in his voice and gaze, some longing and regret. Phil had seen this face many times, the last time a few years before, when Tommy got sick just before their camping trip and they had to cancel plans. The two older boys then rose to the occasion, reassuring their younger brother that it wasn't his fault and that they even preferred a tent of blankets and pillows in the living room, but even with their acting skills, it was easy to guess that they were disappointed.

Now Wilbur didn't look as though he was trying to find the culprit or to complain about the injustice of the world. He was just tired and lonely and he longed for a moment of peace.

"You can go if you want." Phil walked over to sit at the opposite end of the mattress. "I'm done for today, Tommy and Techno are taking care of each other... I don't have much to do anyway."

To his surprise, Wilbur looked at him suspiciously, narrowing his eyes as if expecting a trick.

"No," he said finally, slowly and clearly still waiting for something. "No, that's... Thank you, but no."

Phil liked to think that he was pretty good at reading subliminal messages. Right now, for example, he was receiving very strong signals that he was not welcome. But he couldn't understand why. And, frankly speaking, he didn't have much strength to guess anymore.

"Are you mad at me?" He asked instead, and Wilbur in surprise immediately forgot his face as a very inept detective.

He blinked, looked at his father, and finally relaxed a bit, smiling slightly.

"I think that's my line," he said. "Why would I be mad at you?"

Phil smiled back, happy to see the atmosphere relaxed.

"I don't know," he replied, and to complete the sentence he added, "You look like you are."

Wilbur's smile faded slightly. He bit his lip and turned his head, clenching his hands in his thighs. Phil suspected it was mainly to keep his arms from hugging himself automatically. He was silent for a moment, silently watching the crib where Fundy, for once, slept unmoved by absolutely nothing.

"I'm not mad," he said finally, but even though he tried very hard to hide it, you could hear that he was barely in control of his voice. "How... How could I even be mad?"

Phil could name a couple of good reasons. Some might just exist in his head and be paranoid, okay, but some definitely had a grain of truth to them.

"Wilbur." He put a hand on his son's knee, trying to ignore the way the boy flinched and for a second he looked like he was about to pull away. He didn't, but the intention alone was enough. "Even from here, I can hear you thinking. And those aren't exactly friendly thoughts." He waited a moment, and when only silence answered him, he sighed heavily. "When was the last time you left the house? Not with Fundy, with friends."

The silence grew a little louder and more meaningful. Wilbur grimaced, but finally shrugged.

"I don't remember..." he finally admitted.

Phil nodded, absolutely not surprised.

"Exactly. Did you see yourself in the mirror today? With all respect, you look like shit." He smiled, trying to lighten the atmosphere a bit. "I'm surprised your brothers haven't told you yet."

Wilbur grimaced, but without that theatrical indignation he usually used to emphasize how cruel and mean his family was to him.

"They did," he only muttered. "Tommy four times."

Phil was sure there were more than four, but what Wilbur failed to hear, it couldn't hurt him.

"You see it yourself. Call Schlatt and go somewhere together." He patted his son on the thigh, trying to cheer him up. "Fundy will really be fine if you aren't here once when called. We'll take care of him. I can even promise you that I won't leave him alone with Tommy for a second."

Oddly enough, Wilbur didn't seem a little bit pleased with the prospect of a night off or even protecting the toddler from the harmful influence of a teenager. He looked as if he was

getting closer to a nervous breakdown with each passing second and he was slowly lacking the strength to hide it at all.

"But... Because..." he stammered finally, taking a deeper breath, although he was already betrayed by the trembling of his voice. "I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage of you. I mean, even more so than before."

Of all the denominations, this was the one Phil expected the least.

"You're not taking advantage of me," he assured, and it was true, not just an attempt to quell the coming hysteria. Ever since he saw Wilbur with Fundy in his arms, in an apartment that definitely remembered better and cleaner times, he had never once thought of helping him as something beyond the norm, something beyond the commitment he had made by taking the kids under his roof. His boys may have been adults, but they were still his children, he felt responsible for them, and he couldn't imagine leaving any of them alone because he had made a mistake. Even if the mistake was quite big, and led to another little gremlin appearing in their family.

Wilbur didn't seem to see it that way, or maybe he was just in the stage of panic when he was getting completely deaf to logical arguments because he just shook his head and put his arms around himself.

"But I moved in here. Again!" He added, as if admitting to a great crime. His chin was shaking, his eyes were glazed, and he had to take a deep breath every now and then, because it was impossible to understand what he was saying. "After... After I promised I had everything under control and I didn't go to college even though you wanted me to go, and I really didn't want to be a burden to you anymore, and... And now I'm here again!" He sniffed loudly. "And there's Fundy and I don't even have any plan and I'm too tired to think about it but you'll get tired of me in the end and I have no idea what I'm going to do with myself then and where I'm going to and... And that's not how it was supposed to be. It's all wrong. I wanted to tell you sooner, I really did. But somehow... Somehow I couldn't. I was afraid you'd be... not even angry. Disappointed." He swallowed the first tears, hastily wiping his face with his sleeve. "Because you gave me a chance when you adopted me. And I know you like to say that we were just owed a good house because we were just kids and kids need to be protected, but that's a load of bullshit. Neither of us were yours, not in the beginning. You didn't owe us anything. But you took us anyway and gave us everything, you gave me everything." He put a hand to his chest, lifting his head for the first time to look his father straight in the eye. "I didn't want you to think I just wasted it. Even if it's true."

Phil wasn't even sure why he was surprised at all by the confession. His children were always able to break his heart like no other.

"Oh. Oh, Wilbur..." He held out his hands, a little reflexively taking his son's face in his palms. Wilbur didn't back away, staring at him with large, wet eyes. "I don't even know where to start."

More tears could be traced down his cheeks, and Phil wiped them hurriedly with his fingers.

"I'm sorry."

Ah, yeah, of course...

"No, not like that," he sighed, slowly lowering his hands. Wilbur grimaced and leaned closer as if he was clinging to the touch involuntarily, but then froze and stepped away, embarrassed. "Why do you think you can't stay here?"

Wilbur looked down at his hands, still clasped around his shoulders.

"You said so yourself," he said softly, with some reproach, as if he thought the necessity to repeat it was unnecessary cruelty. "You said I should pack."

Phil had always, by principle, conviction, and on the basis of numerous evidence, considered his children bloody intelligent, even when they were just trying to eat sand. But sometimes he felt that to keep things that way, his boys had to do or say something damn stupid every now and then in the name of balance.

"Pack your other things," he corrected, surprised himself at how calm it sounded. "In your apartment. To move back here. You thought-" He paused when he finally managed to digest all the facts and closed his eyes for a moment, angry with himself on the one hand, and bloody hurt by how little his own child had faith in him on the other. "Wilbur." He rubbed his temples as if it would physically release some of his emotions. "Listen carefully. Nobody's ever going to kick you out of here, okay? It will always be your home. You will always be welcome here and I will always be glad that you want to come back. We will all be. Well, maybe Tommy won't, because he wanted to convert this room into a bedroom for Tubbo. But somehow he will survive without it."

Wilbur was still watching him wary and incredulous, but his shoulders relaxed a bit and he even smiled at the mention of the twelve-year-old's dream ruining. Phil took that as a good sign.

"I'm not mad about any of this," he continued. But then he hesitated, sighed, and shook his head. "Well, maybe a little. You should have been more careful. But such things do happen sometimes and you have to come to terms with them. I'm... I'm disappointed," he admitted, and Wilbur immediately cringed into himself even tighter. "By many things. I wanted a different life for you, more organized and easier. I wanted to give you all the options, so it hurts a bit that you lost most of them to one stupid mistake. But you know that yourself, so I won't keep reminding you of it. You are a smart boy, you will plan a new future for yourself, I'm sure. You don't need to rush. Give yourself a moment to rest." He smiled reassuringly. "You're an adult now. Remember that old people cannot overstrain themselves. They can die from it."

As he had hoped, Wilbur laughed, still a little hysterical, but as he rubbed his nose, the first flashes of hope were visible in his eyes.

"Who told you that? Gremlin?"

Phil jokingly poked his finger on his chest.

"You. And you were right," he sneered, but then his expression became serious. He was going to clear up all doubts at once. "You're not using me. You just need help. It's okay to ask for it."

Wilbur took a deep breath, a little bit to calm down completely, a bit of obvious relief.

"I know. I mean... You always said that. But that was before, how else..." He bit his lip as he looked away. "I'm not a child anymore."

Phil frowned.

"You are my child," he reminded him emphatically. "And you will never stop being one."

Even if Wilbur nodded, he still did it quite sluggishly and it was obvious that his logical arguments were his and his emotions. Phil was sure they could talk about it all the rest of the afternoon, and it would all fly in one ear and out the other.

"Wait here," he said instead, and left the room, closing the door as softly as he could so as not to wake Fundy.

He was never overly pedantic, but he liked when things had their place and were put away. The latter rarely worked with three boys in the house, but luckily none of them had ever rummaged around in his office, so he found a shoe box covered with colored paper right away. Tommy decorated it himself and in theory he should probably put something inside, but ultimately decided that it was sufficient on its own as a Christmas gift. Phil didn't complain. He already got so many pasta ornaments that he could survive the winter on nothing but them.

He pushed aside more or less abstract drawings, a few apparently exceptionally beautiful stones, and finally found exactly what he was looking for at the very bottom.

When he returned to the room clutching a slightly crumpled, very crooked piece of paper in his hand, Wilbur was still sitting exactly in the same place, rubbing his nose loudly on a tissue. He was watching his father closely, but this time not suspiciously, but rather curiously, which was a big change for the better, even though he still looked bad.

Phil sat down next to him, much closer than before, and almost solemnly slipped a rectangular piece of paper into his hand. The boy looked down, frowning, then, when he finally understood, his eyes widened, almost comically surprised.

"Jesus..." he gasped, turning the paper over his hands in disbelief. A "Free Hug Coupon," as he had once called it, which was never needed because no matter how much he disavowed it, he was clingy as hell. "You kept it for so many years?"

"Of course. I kept everything you gave me," he confirmed, and Wilbur glanced instinctively towards the door, probably following the two glittered cones that stood in the living room, the more he asked to be hidden. "So?" He raised his eyebrows, spreading his arms urgently. "I don't remember it having any expiry date."

It took several seconds for Wilbur to understand. Two more, before his eyes started to get wet again, his lips quivered and a low sound came out of his throat, somewhere between sobbing and laughing. And one more, the longest one, before he finally lunged forward with such force that they both nearly landed on their backs.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered, clutching at his father's shirt with such desperation as if he had nothing else left, no other salvation. "I am so, so sorry..."

Phil stroked his hair, on the one hand feeling his heart ache from the very sight, on the other, glad that the worst was finally over.

"It will be fine," he assured, rocking his son gently. If Wilbur needed to cry it out, he wasn't going to forbid him. "We'll figure something out."

Whenever possible, Wilbur sobbed with even more despair.

"I'm the worst child in the world," he choked out dramatically from one shallow breath to the next.

"Nah. You tried very hard, but you are still a bit short of the podium. Wilbur." He rested his cheek against his son's head, drawing him even closer. "I'm not saying everything's fine. I don't trust you now. And I probably won't trust you for a long time yet. You lied to me. More than once. And you've proved you're not even a bit of an adult yet. But that doesn't mean I've stopped loving you and won't help you when you need it. Or that I'll throw you out on the pavement or I'll take your baby away."

Wilbur shook his head, still clinging to him.

"I'm sorry for that..."

"I know."

"I don't think about you that way."

"I know."

"But I was so scared..."

"Shh... I know. Come on, come on..." He leaned in to kiss his dark hair. "It will be fine. A bit hard, probably. Well, damn hard. And you will probably regret some things very much, and you will not even get to know many of them. But I can see you looking at Fundy. And I don't think having him will be one of them."

Wilbur sniffed again, slowly balancing his breath. Phil ran his hand down his back, trying to make it easier for him, and right now he didn't really care how old his baby was. It was important that he was safe.

"Maybe it won't be that bad." Wilbur finally relaxed his grip a little, but only so he could rest his head a little more comfortably on his shoulder. "It can't be that hard..."

For a long moment, Phil was torn between the need to bring him down to earth and the somewhat malicious letting reality check for itself. He could stand next to him and say "I told you" every time Fundy ran home in muddy shoes, made a tantrum in the store, or reminded him at midnight that he should bring crayons, tech block, and freshly grown watercress to school. Pity? Yes. Mean? Of course. Satisfying? As hell.

But since he had a heart, a will, and a spine far too soft for his own good, he somehow drove away temptation.

"Do you remember that feeling when you are exhausted, you have no idea what you are doing, and your child wants something very much but cannot describe what exactly?" Wilbur nodded uncertainly. "Get used to it. For the next eighteen years."

He could clearly hear Wilbur swallowing loudly.

"That bad?"

Phil pushed him far enough to nod at the crib.

"Look at him," he ordered, a bit surprised at how his own voice softened immediately at the mere thought of a sleeping baby. "Now imagine that he disappears for a few hours in the middle of winter and you have to look for him all over the city because he wanted to see the lake at night."

Wilbur, usually very eager to argue that he was absolutely always a good kid, and all the stories to the contrary are outright slander, suddenly somehow did not protest. Instead, he paled visibly.

"Ah. Yes, I think... I think I would kill him for it."

"The whole problem is, no, you wouldn't. He's just like you used to be - too cute to be angry with him."

Wilbur scowled.

"What does "used to be" mean?" He snorted, indignant. "I'm still cute!"

Phil didn't have time to answer, because at the same moment a screech came from somewhere downstairs, followed by a loud:

"Daaad! Techno is fucking mean! Make him stop!"

He sighed heavily. In comparison with the crying at night, ever-hungry for attention baby, Tommy fared surprisingly poorly...

"Listen to your brother," he shouted back, not moving.

"But he abuses me!" As if in confirmation, there was a bang and another scream, probably announcing that Techno had finally knocked his brother off the couch. "Yeah, sure! Go ahead and just lock me up in the basement-!"

Phil closed his eyes, feeling the first pang of longing for the times when he had shared the house with only one perpetually offended child.

"Want some good advice? Don't give him siblings. Not worth it."

"I don't plan on it." Wilbur laughed, but immediately fell silent and saddened. "And it's not like I would have anyone with..." he said much, much more quietly, and once Phil began to gather within himself to say something comforting and understanding, as befits a person who had never been in any serious relationship, suddenly he blurted out: "Do you think I'll be a good dad?"

It was still strange to hear that question and think about the present, not some hazy, distant future. It was strange to think about it looking at Wilbur, the same one who had been throwing snow with his friends not so long ago and, shivering from the cold, and assured him that he was super warm, he had no wet socks at all and he wanted to stay in the park for another hour. But maybe it wasn't about age at all, or the fact that it had all hit them a little unexpectedly and without warning. Maybe in Phil's eyes his son was always going to appear small, no matter what.

"I think you'll try very hard," he said, quite honestly. "And we'll be there to help you if you need to. I don't want you to move out. And I'm not helping you because I have to, if that's what you're worried about. I help you because you are my child, I love you and I want you to be happy."

For the first time since Phil had taken him home, Wilbur looked like he had actually shed a goddamn heavy weight off of him and was able to breathe deeply. If, however, he wanted to express it in some more verbal way, he didn't get a chance because something blew up again on the ground floor and they both jumped up.

"As I said," Phil stretched, gathering himself to face what awaited him in the living room, "one extra child would be fine for us."

Wilbur smiled, way too malicious for someone who had just been crying on his shoulder.

"Better check it out before we have one less left," he advised.

Phil narrowed his eyes.

"You know, I just realized that I still have coupons for 'free cleaning'..."

Wilbur stopped smiling immediately.

In the end, nothing suffered much damage, other than the pride of Tommy, whom, when the rest of the family finally descended into the living room, Techno had already knocked down on the couch and pressed him against it with his knee, triumphantly holding the remote control in his hand. Not bothering himself with screams and insults, he looked first at his father and then his brother, raising his eyebrows as if waiting for some confirmation that the house would finally be a little quiet.

Wilbur shrugged.

Techno tilted his head.

Wilbur rolled his eyes.

Phil didn't even try to interfere in their silent discussion. They may not be biologically related, but sometimes he had the feeling that the universe had given them some typical twin features just to help them spread their chaos.

"Wil, why don't you play us something?" He offered, ignoring Tommy's whining that no one was taking him seriously and he's feeling very disrespected. Mainly because he expressed his frustration with a series of insults against both brothers. "It's been a bit too quiet in here lately."

Wilbur, sitting comfortably on the couch, froze for a moment and very, very slowly pushed the pillow over his lap.

"Ah. But... Well, I don't have a guitar."

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"Did you leave it in the apartment?"

On the one hand, when he thought about it, he didn't actually remember Wilbur taking anything but Fundy's stuff. On the other hand, he had a hard time believing he had left his instrument in all this mess. Usually he was stuck to it and dragged it with him absolutely everywhere.

As if to prove it, Wilbur hung his head, staring down at his hands as if he had suddenly lost some very precious, familiar shape and weight.

"I sold it," he finally confessed, and even Tommy instantly fell silent, surprised. "Right after Fundy was born. Because we didn't have much money to buy things for him, and... And that was the only valuable thing left."

Phil knew he should say something, preferably something smart, something that would matter, but for his anger, he had very few words and a lot of emotion. So Techno relieved him of having a reaction, leaning over the couch to slap his brother on the back of the head.

"You know you're a moron?" He asked quite seriously, crossing his arms over his chest.

Wilbur didn't even try to argue whether the blow was deserved or not.

"I know," he admitted, hanging his head sadly.

"You could have asked me."

"Yeah, sure. And you'd tell everyone."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"No I wouldn't. Only dad. Not Tommy."

Tommy turned to him, genuinely indignant.

"Hey!"

"And you made Dad sad," Techno continued, completely ignoring the interruption. "Way to go. Good job."

"It's not my fault! Fundy had to eat something."

"Oh, come on. We are all three proof that "had to" is a very strong word..."

Phil raised a hand, effectively silencing the three of them.

"Do you remember who you sold it to?" He asked, looking at Wilbur, who had instantly lost his already miserable desire to argue.

"Dad..."

"No," he said firmly. "I bought you that guitar. I listened to you strumming it at night for several years. You'll have it, even if it's the last thing I do."

With the latter, he wasn't so wrong at all. The boy Wilbur had sold a guitar to over the internet ignored the increasing number of messages until Phil finally, with a heavy heart, offered twice the price for the instrument. Only then did he receive a reply and, after short negotiations, they finally made the deal.

"You know you didn't have to do this?" Wilbur asked, but the way he immediately picked up the guitar in his arms and moved his hand lovingly over the strings was saying something else entirely. Phil already felt that this evening Fundy would understand for the first time what it means to live under one roof with a musician.

He smiled fondly at the mere thought.

"I had to. You know I had to."

Wilbur froze for a moment and looked up to look at him, but the look of wonder quickly replaced understanding and he looked over his shoulder toward the living room, where Tommy was just trying to convince Fundy that he should be the one to fetch things, not throwing toys and crying until someone kindly hands it to him.

"Yeah," he finally admitted, smiling back. „I know.”

There's gonna be a time skip next chapter, just to let you know. Cause I really wanted to write Fundy as a proper little gremlin he is.
(Ekhn also Kristin ekhn)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A special big "thank you" to @Katricia for fighting with all my translation errors. You're the best! <3

The first half of the chapter is set in the past, the second half - six years ahead. (Yes, I had to stuff a few more flashbacks here. Fundy has a good childhood, and what kind of chapter is it without trauma?)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil had never been particularly eager to celebrate his own birthday. Okay, suddenly he was a bit older, so what, it happens to everyone. He saw no reason to throw a party for the occasion and celebrate another small step towards death. And it wasn't that he wouldn't have anyone to invite, absolutely not. He was just a very practical man, and he didn't like to waste money on stupid things.

And then a little gremlin, nine years old, came under his roof, and Phil suddenly found himself having a deep urge to buy colorful, pointy hats, paper plates with silly prints, and a cake larger than they could eat. He wanted Wilbur to feel special, to be really in the spotlight at least once, to be aware that he was important and that without him, the house would be bloody empty and silent again.

The problem was that Phil, no matter how he disavowed it, wasn't the youngest anymore. And he was certainly not ten years old, nor had any idea what the perfect birthday should look like in the opinion of the new generation. Was a little party at home still enough? He had a lot of hope, because he didn't plan to end up like Bad, who took a whole bunch of excited boys to the arcade and then drove them home one by one, looking as if he had aged five years in one day. On the other hand, while he wouldn't admit it out loud, he really wanted to be a "cool dad" who said yes to everything and doesn't think about nonsense like diabetes, obesity and broken bones. He just wasn't sure if he could afford such carelessness. In a moral and financial sense.

"It's coming up soon," he remarked, tearing a page off his calendar and smiling at the date already marked with a red marker.

Wilbur paused for a moment in his attempt to break the record for the number of pancakes stuffed into his mouth at once (apparently Dream had fit four before he choked and vomited...) and leaned out in his chair to see better. He frowned, tilted his head thoughtfully, mumbled something indistinctly, and when he didn't even understand himself, he finally made the decision with obvious pain to swallow his chance to win.

"What's coming up soon?" He asked a little suspiciously. Why was it hardly surprising, since his last 'special' date was his visit to the dentist. Which they should actually repeat soon.

But maybe later, when the cake and sweets do their part in the development of cavities.

Phil pretended he had to concentrate very hard to remember something as he tossed the last pancake from the pan to the plate.

"I'm pretty sure I've accounted for my taxes already, so... Yeah, it must be your birthday, there's no other option." He nodded to himself, turning the stove off and tossing the pan down in the sink, where it would wait until it was needed again and he had to wash it at last. "The tenth, if I remember correctly. Very serious age if you want to know my opinion."

He turned, a bit surprised by the lack of reaction. Wilbur continued to stare at him, much more closely than before, and didn't even nod, let alone any more enthusiastic response. Shouldn't he be happy? Phil was sure he was going to be happy, kids usually looked forward to their birthday and okay, he wasn't so naive as to believe Wilbur had gotten a lot of presents and a big party in his previous houses, but still... this time it will be different, right?

Yet Wil's gaze was blank, his face expressionless, exactly in the same shivering way as a few months earlier, when he appeared on the doorstep with a suitcase far too light. If you had to add a yellow sweater, Phil was ready to bet that he had just made some strange time travel, and he didn't like it at all. Wilbur shouldn't hide his emotions, he shouldn't believe he had to do it.

A few unpleasantly long seconds passed before the boy finally looked down, slowly setting his fork down beside the unfinished pancakes.

"You think so?" He finally asked, so softly as if he was physically uncomfortable to make any sound out of him. He was definitely tense, his shoulders curled, his feet tucked under the chair as if he were trying to take up as little space as possible. But it was still a question - something he rarely did in the first few weeks of their relationship. A sign that the regression was not as severe as Phil had feared at first. Just another bad memory, a bad moment, a bad day. Nothing they couldn't handle.

"Well..." Not really knowing if he could come any closer, or if it was better to give Wilbur some space, he leaned his hips against the top of the cupboard, still holding the plate in his hand. The pancakes were starting to cool, but they were the last thing he ever thought about. "You can't say you're getting any younger. Soon enough you will grow up and be able to reach the top shelf yourself. And then what are we going to do with all these stools?"

He nodded his head at one of the stools now standing in almost every room, theoretically to develop the boy's independence, in practice - because Phil was lazy and really didn't want to go down the stairs every time his son wanted something outside his reach. Wilbur wasn't thrilled with it and insisted that he was fine without them, he was very big and very tall, and he could jump very well, certainly better than Dream, who was just cheating. This didn't prevent him from using stools when he thought that no one was looking.

Strangely, this time he didn't get offended or tried to prove that he was perfectly capable of reaching the cupboard, which was a good twenty centimeters from his hand, even when he was standing on his toes. Instead, he pursed his lips, giving the furniture a look as if it had done him some great harm.

"You think so?" He repeated, and though he tried very hard, this time he couldn't hide the obvious pain in his voice.

Phil hated that tone. That mixture of disappointment and absolute reconciliation with his fate, as if Wilbur had a grudge against himself for letting himself count on anything better at all. The last time he had heard it was when the boy was eliminated at one stage of the geography competition, and for some reason he told himself that no one would ever let him try again. No, actually. That Phil would never let him try again. Because "he wasn't good enough," he later explained. And "made him ashamed," apparently.

It was hard enough to hear something like that once, it really didn't need a repeat. He just wanted to know if it would be enough if he bought a cake and put a swimming pool in the garden, because, due to the great injustice of the world, he couldn't afford to rent the entire cinema room, as Dream's parents did. Did he say something wrong? At what point had he screwed up so badly, and how was he going to fix it now?

Before he could figure out how to be gentle on a problem he didn't even understand the source of, Wilbur pushed his plate away, jumped off his chair, and took two big steps back, away from him.

"Can I go to my room?" He asked, his eyes fixed on his own feet, and although everything about Phil screamed that he couldn't let him go, he couldn't let him torment himself or have any doubts, he just sighed heavily.

"Of course. Whenever you want," he assured him, because one of the first pieces of advice Puffy had given him was to strengthen the child's confidence that he had a right to time only for himself and his space. "I'll heat you up more food if you're hungry, okay?" He pointed to the still full plate, following advice number two: food is always available and you don't have to earn it.

Wilbur nodded, but didn't even glance his way as he streaked across the living room, as quietly as if he hadn't even touched the floor. Phil had never thought he could be so emotionally thrown against the stairs with his feet, but... Pancakes hadn't tasted so bad in a long time. And he didn't think it had much to do with the fact that they had cooled off long ago.

Wilbur didn't show up for the rest of the day. Sitting in his office, Phil could hear him go to the bathroom several times and even go down to the kitchen once, but with the remnants of his will, he forced himself to stay at his desk. If Wilbur wanted to talk, he would come to him himself. It will do no good if he feels hemmed in, at best he will withdraw and retreat even more. He was safe and sound, he felt safe enough to leave the room, absolutely no harm done to him. He just wasn't ready for the conversation. Nothing wrong, nothing abnormal, nothing Phil couldn't patiently wait out.

Yet when the boy finally showed up at his bedroom door, Phil realized how tense he was himself. While some of the relief might have been that the figure lurking in the darkness, the first thing he saw when he awoke in the middle of the night, was not a demon lurking for his soul, but still a stone fell from his heart.

"Wilbur," he muttered, suppressing a yawn. "What happened? Bad dream?"

He sat up in bed, blinking to wake up a little, instinctively stretching his arms towards the boy, but the boy didn't even move. The more Phil's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, the more clearly he could see how pale the child was, how tense his arms were, how his cheeks glistened with tears in the pale light outside the window.

"Hey, hey, Wilbur," he tried again, as slowly as possible, throwing back the covers and turning his body over to the baby. The floor was icy when he put his feet on it. He didn't even want to check that Wilbur remembered wearing socks. "Everything is fine, nothing is happening. I'm not mad, I promise."

Wilbur shuddered as if he had only now considered the possibility and, of course, immediately considered it the only probable one. He stepped back, let out a choked squeak, but apparently even his fear couldn't match the enormity of his despair at that moment, because he immediately dropped his head, squeezed his eyes shut, and almost ran straight into the open arms at him. Phil immediately surrounded him tightly, wide awake now, ready to take on everything.

The only thing he didn't expect was quiet and pained:

"You want to send me back?"

Of course, Wilbur had asked about it before, but he was sure that this stage was over. Usually, when his child woke him up in the middle of the night, he just needed his closeness or reassurance that no, no one was angry with him, no one even had a reason to be.

"What?"

Wilbur loosened his grip, slowly lifting his head from his shoulder.

"Back," he said impatiently. "Do you want to send me back." He waited a moment, and when he still didn't get any answer, he pushed himself out of his embrace and stepped back out of reach of his hands. "If you want to, you have to do it now."

He was clearly trying to sound serious and very formal, as if he was just making an important deal, but the way he wrapped his arms around his shoulders, the way his chin quivered and his eyes started to cry again...

"Wilbur, why-," he tried, trying very hard to keep himself calm, but Wilbur shook his head violently.

"You have to!" He demanded, this time angrily, honest, burning, and lined with deep hurt. "Because- Because nobody will want me after that! You have to do it *now*."

If Phil had been a little less sleepy, less taken by surprise, and a bit more prepared for such a conversation, he probably would have been able to choose his words better and might even have come up with something really smart. But it was the middle of the night, his child trembling with fear and demanding the impossible of him so firmly that for a moment he forgot his common sense and almost believed it himself.

He lowered his shoulders, feeling his throat tighten.

"I want you, Wilbur," he said, which was a mere statement of facts, but for some reason at this point in time sounded more like a plea.

Please don't try to run away from me.

Wilbur, if possible, had shrunk in himself even more.

"But you won't," he said coolly, still with the same unwavering certainty. "You won't want me anymore."

"Shhh... That's not true." Phil held out his arms to him, breathing in relief as the child allowed him to stroke his shoulders. "None of that is true, I promise. Why do you even think that?"

Wilbur sniffed loudly. He looked a bit calmer, but he was still tense and clearly choked up his emotions.

"You said I'd be too old," he finally replied, hanging his head as if admitting a crime and accepting punishment at the same time.

Phil blinked.

"Never said that," he began, but he broke off and flinched as Wilbur suddenly shook his hands away.

"You said!" He shouted, not even looking at him this time. "You said ten years is a lot! And- And nobody wants older children. Nobody ever wants you when you're not small. Everyone *knows that*," he added, finally looking up. The way he looked at him was more than enough to make Phil forget any precaution, forget about keeping his distance, and simply pull him against him, pressing him tightly against his chest. Wilbur made no effort to break free. "And you don't want me either. But- But you have to send me back now, then maybe- Maybe someone else will take me and-" he sobbed, shuddering through his whole body and suddenly he cried for good, loudly and completely openly.

Phil rocked him, one hand stroking his back, the other slowly stroking his hair.

"Shhh... Nobody's going to go anywhere," he assured him, feeling that one more moment, and he might start crying himself. And not that he was ashamed of it, but something told him that only then would he scare Wilbur to death. "You're staying with me, okay? I don't care how old you are, Wilbur, they were just jokes. I'm sorry to scare you, I'm so sorry..."

It took a good half an hour for the boy to calm down. The next hour Wilbur spent curled up by his side, blowing his nose and listening to Phil's assurances that no matter how much he

grows or how old he is, he will always be his little boy whom he loves with all his heart and would never trade for anyone else. Neither of them slept much that night, but at that point there were needs far more important than just rest.

After all that, the birthday party was quite successful. A bunch of boys who, as expected, left a terrible mess, but Wilbur looked delighted and was laughing the loudest of all as he ran around the room in circles. Phil couldn't have asked for more, especially since he didn't really like that nasty vase he had once gotten from someone as a gift that Sappap had knocked off the shelf trying to hit Dream with a pillow. He liked even less the way Wilbur looked at him at first, as if he expected to be screamed at. Apart from this moment of doubt, everything went perfectly, the gifts were opened, the sweets were eaten, the fruit was completely forgotten. When Phil had finally finished tidying up the kitchen after everyone had left, planning to leave the living room for tomorrow, Wilbur was already lying on the couch, among the crumpled cushions and colored papers. He pretended to be asleep, and any other day Phil would tease him a bit about avoiding cleaning, but this time somehow he didn't have the heart for it. He just pretended not to see the triumphant smile at all as he picked the boy up and took him up the stairs.

Techno's first birthday in their home was much calmer. Perhaps because Techno seemed to believe there were endless reasons why he could be sent back at any time and age was really only somewhere at the bottom of his list. Phil tried not to think about it too much. He breathed a sigh of relief when Techno grimaced at the offer of a large party and refused to invite anyone. Could his extreme introversion prove to be a problem in the future? Of course. Did the carpet in the living room now have a chance to survive the next few months? Yes.

Planning a party for three had turned out to be much more difficult than he had expected. How was he supposed to please a child whose main hobby was sitting with his nose in books? He read him to sleep every day, he needed something different, something special, something that would make Techno feel appreciated, feel part of the family...

Phil started acting the day before.

"I need you in the kitchen," he said, peering into the room.

Techno, though he'd just mumbled "Come in" in response to a knock, looked up at him from his book with such surprise as if he had just noticed him now.

"What for?"

Phil opened the door a little wider so he could lean his shoulder against the frame.

"I'm making a cake."

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"Cake," he repeated, clearly expecting more. Phil grinned.

"Cake," he confirmed. "For you."

Techno frowned, then relaxed as if he had just understood. Or as if he had forgotten that he had a birthday at all.

"Ah. Aha."

Phil decided there was no point in teasing him anymore.

"Let's just say I'm not particularly good at sticking to the recipe..." He suspended his voice significantly, voluntarily sacrificing some of his pride. He may not have been a professional confectioner, but he could put the ingredients in a bowl and mix them together, he lived alone and cooked for years, and somehow he did not starve to death. But if that was all it took to get his boy out of the room...

Techno tilted his head, raising an eyebrow.

"You want me to dictate the recipe for you?" He asked incredulously. It wasn't entirely clear whether he was more surprised that someone might need help with something so simple, or that he had come to him with it.

Phil focused on the latter.

"I want you to make sure I don't mix salt and sugar. Wilbur would have gotten bored before we got to the eggs, but you are going to be a great helper. You are good at making plans and sticking to them."

The boy's ears reddened slightly and he quickly turned his head away, pretending he didn't take it as a compliment at all. Sometimes it was hard to see how easy it was to make him happy with something so banal...

"Okay," he muttered, setting the book down on the bedside table. "If you say so..."

He was a good helper. An even better chef when he got bored of watching Phil pretend he couldn't break an egg and just took his spoon and bowl. Rarely could he concentrate on anything that wasn't a book for so long, and he probably didn't even notice himself when he began to move around the kitchen as if he were in his own kingdom. He was certainly surprised when the cake actually turned out to be exactly as fluffy as it should be when it was taken out of the oven.

"Great job," Phil said, ruffling his hair. "I told you you'd do great."

This time Techno blushed all over and immediately covered his face with his hair to hide it.

Wilbur helped them decorate the cake, so naturally, the kitchen quickly turned into a fighting ground for whether the anteaters should be allowed to live or humans should kill them all until they mutated and took over the world. By the end, Techno looked like he was ready to personally defend each pet one at a time just to make his brother angry, but no matter how loud they shouted and how much frosting landed on their faces instead of on the cake, you could see they were both having a great time. They were having fun, in their own way. Phil remained calm until they tried to gouge out their eyes with their forks.

The birthday itself was also relatively easy. Techno relished his right to choose what to eat and watch, got way more cake than he should, and blew out the candles even though he said it was 'stupid'. He blushed up to his ears as they sang him a 'happy birthday' and argued with Wilbur about whether he was showing off on purpose, or whether he just "had an innate talent and you envy me because you're not so cute!" He was pleased with the presents, too, and must have forgotten to point out that the portrait Wilbur had given him was, at best, very original.

Simply put, he acted like any happy child. Phil's heart melted.

Still, he was a bit surprised when the boy approached him in the evening and without a word embraced him tightly around the waist. He only stared down for a second, surprised, but then he regained consciousness and returned the hug.

"I guess you liked it," he said, running his fingers along the barely-held braid.

Techno hummed, gripping his fingers tighter on his shirt.

"It was weird," he said, as if he couldn't tell himself what he was feeling and thinking.

The temptation turned out to be too great and Phil unraveled the remains of the braid, running his fingers through his long hair before starting to braid it again.

"What exactly?" He asked, trying to help the boy deal with his emotions. No matter how depressing the very thought was, positive experiences were still new to him, and he sometimes couldn't react to them.

Techno was silent for a moment before finally lifting his head.

"That you gave me a party," he confessed quietly, shyly. "As if... As if you were really glad I'm here. That I exist."

In this way, Phil found that sometimes he didn't even have to say anything stupid to end up heartbroken. Apparently, it came free with parenting.

With that in mind, he was ready for the worst when Tommy's birthday was fast approaching a few years later.

"Any ideas?" He asked the older sons, taking advantage of the fact that his youngest child was currently trying to flood the entire bathroom because he was already big and didn't require any assistance in bathing. On the other hand, the splashing meant he was still alive.

Wilbur stopped striking the strings for a moment and turned away, resting his chin on the back of the couch.

"He didn't mention anything. I mean, not at all. I thought he was going to talk about it all the time, but no, not a word."

Phil frowned. In fact, when he looked at it this way, he would expect a flood of words from such a lively child about what he wants and what the cake should look like.

"It's Tommy," Techno said, over the book, not at all touched by the fact that his brother was acting a little weird. Maybe because, in his opinion, Tommy has always been weird. "Let's just get a pizza and invite Tubbo. And Ranboo. And maybe Drista, but only if you're ready for house renovations."

"We can surprise him," Wilbur picked up, smiling in exactly the same innocent way that he always did when he planned something wrong. "Let him think we have forgotten."

Phil gave him a scolding look.

"You better watch if I don't forget to take you to your guitar lessons tomorrow," he warned, even though everyone remembered perfectly well that when that had actually happened a few weeks earlier, he was much more concerned than Wilbur himself. "But maybe it's not a bad idea... But if he asks, you have to tell him the truth," he pointed out, pointing his finger at first to one son, then to the other. "I don't want him to be sad, okay?"

Wilbur slumped lower on the couch, grumpy.

"That's no fun at all..."

Tommy didn't ask. Phil was worried about it more and more every day, but he kept telling himself that in all probability the boy just didn't know the calendar and had no memory of the dates. He would guess most six-year-olds didn't. Oh, no, actually - seven-year-olds. He already felt that it would be hard for him to get used to...

Either way, the lack of questions made the surprise preparation much easier, so when Tommy ran down the stairs on Saturday morning, a little scared after he couldn't find anyone upstairs, he found his family in the living room already waiting for him with breakfast. Somehow, Wilbur even managed to get Techno to put on a colorful hat and kept trying to sneak a few photos of him, for which he almost lost his phone twice. Phil made no attempt to intervene, just making sure no one waved their hands too close to the pile of pancakes into which they had stuck seven colored candles.

Tommy stopped, one hand still on the rail and his mouth open. He looked at Phil, at the brothers, at the table, then back at his father, and finally he slowly withdrew his hand, taking an uncertain step forward.

"What is it?" He asked, standing on tiptoe to see better, but not getting too close, as if he was afraid that breakfast might attack him at any moment. Most of all, however, he kept his eyes on Techno and his hat, and each time he seemed more and more surprised.

Phil smiled encouragingly as he motioned him to his side.

"Birthday breakfast," he explained, picking the boy up and setting him on a chair so that he could feel tallest and the center of attention for a moment. He apparently especially liked the first one, because he straightened up and beamed all over. "You don't get cake before dinner, I'm not suicidal. But nothing will happen if you blow out the candles now."

He reached for the matches and lit each candle individually. Strangely, Tommy neither wanted to do it himself, nor even burned himself on the first occasion. Perhaps because he was staring at the pile of pancakes as if he didn't quite understand why they existed at all and why on his plate.

"What for?" He asked, crouching and bringing his face close to the flames. Phil put a careful hand on the back of his neck, ready to pull him back if he was going to burn his eyebrows. He wasn't quite sure how he felt about the thought that his child had clearly never blown out candles before, but he still deluded that maybe his mother just didn't like this particular tradition...

"You have to make a wish," Wilbur said, leaning over the table to put a pointy hat on the child's head. And then a second because, apparently, he found horns fit the gremlin a lot more. "But don't say it out loud! Or it won't come true."

Tommy tilted his head, still incredibly surprised.

"And who's birthday is it?" He asked finally, looking from Wilbur to Techno and finally to his father. "No, not Phil's," he decided, and nodded to himself, "because he's too old. He already had too much, he must have run out of them."

The older boys exchanged glances. Phil had been too busy figuring out exactly where his child's line of reasoning was going, so Techno did it for him.

"Well..." He stabbed his brother right in the chest with his finger. "It's your birthday, idiot."

Tommy didn't even take offense at the insult.

"I have a birthday?" He repeated in a whisper, his eyes widening in an almost comic shock. He looked like a very astonished goldfish, and in other circumstances, someone would have reminded him of it. For the time being, however, the atmosphere at the table was somewhat chilled.

"Well, yes." Techno shrugged, but judging from the moment he moved closer to Wilbur, he also felt something wrong was approaching and was looking for one willing to take the weight of the conversation from him. "You were born, weren't you? To our suffering..."

The child sat down in the chair with a soft slap, still looking overwhelmed. The last time something had made such an impression on him was when Wilbur told him that the sun would break out in billions of years and wipe out everything in its path.

Phil carefully moved his hand a little lower, stroking his back, and crouched down beside him.

"Tommy, you didn't know when your birthday was?" He asked, hoping very much that he hadn't just hit some very sensitive string. He just wanted at least one of his boys to have no bad memories of his own holiday, was he really asking too much?

In a way, the universe heeded his plea. In a very perverse and not so funny sense.

Tommy inhaled loudly and waved his arms suddenly, almost jumping with excitement.

"I didn't know I had one!" He announced. "No one told me! Tubbo has a birthday. And Ranboo, too, because he told me. But my mom didn't say I did either. I thought... I thought only some people have one." He frowned, but even if it crossed his mind that perhaps he should feel a little worried about it, he immediately displaced her in favor of much more important matters. "I have to tell Tubbo!" He called, hopping off his chair and racing towards the hall. Halfway up, however, he stopped with a loud "Ah!" When he remembered that on foot he might never reach his destination, he stepped back and hung his weight on Phil's shoulder. "Let's go to Tubbo!" He demanded. "Let's go now, now, I have to tell him!"

Informed that Tubbo was on his way to them and that he should be there in half an hour at the most, he calmed down a bit, but continued to stare at everything and everyone with large, glittering eyes as if he still couldn't shake off his shock. He blew out the candles three times and would probably have blown a fourth if Techno had finally taken matches away from Phil, claiming it was way too many free wishes for one gremlin.

"And this is for me?" He made sure, placing his hand on each gift in turn, unable to decide which one to start with. "Ah. Yes, for me," he replied to himself, nodding his head. "Because it's my birthday."

If Phil could, he would never let him go again after that. Unfortunately, he lost to the doorbell and Tommy's childish urge to rush out to the meeting to inform him that "I have a birthday too!" He also repeated it to Ranboo, Niki, Drista and Dream, and only the latter didn't understand in time that he should be delighted with this fact. Techno shot him with a rubber band from his colorful cap. Phil pretended not to see it at all.

"It was the saddest thing I've ever seen," Wilbur assessed as he and Techno helped clear the table late that night. Tommy was dozing on the couch, curled up under the blanket, waiting for someone to carry him upstairs, after he had exhausted all his energy reserves.

Techno, trying to wipe the cake off the tablecloth with a napkin, just shrugged.

"It could have been worse," he said, but without conviction and probably more so that no one would accidentally think that he might be capable of real emotions.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow defiantly.

"How?"

His brother opened his mouth, but Phil slapped his arm in time.

"No," he said firmly, looking from one son to the other. "Please, no more today."

Techno obediently fell silent. Wilbur scooped up the last of the plates from the table before turning to look at Tommy over the back of the couch.

"At least you know it was his best birthday," he finally said, and even if he meant well, it only drove the blade a little deeper into Phil's heart.

* * *

So Phil had a lot of experience throwing birthdays. Even more into thinking about how much his own children have lost and vowing to himself that he will never let them feel as if anything has been taken from them again. And maybe these facts were very obvious to all those around him, because no one had ever tried to stop him from giving his absolute best when it came to the birthday of his first (thanks to the gods so far only) grandson.

Was it a bit silly at times? Probably. For one thing, he was fully aware that Fundy would remember absolutely nothing about his first birthday, no matter how wonderful it might be. But the rest of the family would remember, especially Tommy, delighted that the first thing the birthday boy did with his first blocks was to throw one of them at the head of Techno. Amazingly accurate.

This year, six years after Fundy came into the world, no one even tried to make heavy comments, because whatever you say, six-year-olds were already able to have surprisingly good memories. Even if they were quite selective. Everything had to be perfect, from the colorful balloons to the cake.

"You're doing it again," Wilbur said, leaning against the office door. He tried to make a serious face, but the effect was interrupted by the smudge of red felt-tip pen Fundy had apparently waved too close to his face. "I promised Techno to keep an eye on you."

Phil barely glared at him, too focused on saving the paper crown his grandson tore apart two seconds after it hit his head, which suddenly turned out to be indispensable and without which the whole party would be lost.

"Techno's hysterical," he grunted, holding the tape in his mouth, smoothing down the crumpled paper with his hand. "I'm fine."

Wilbur hummed dissatisfiedly.

"The doctor says otherwise."

"The doctor says I'm perfectly healthy." He put down the tape and examined his handiwork critically. It wasn't perfect, but he never had any art skills, and Fundy was going to forget about the crown in about five minutes anyway, so he considered his work done. "You're making a problem out of nothing." He finally turned to look at his son. "I only have a slight high blood pressure, and I can tell you exactly who I owe it to. There are exactly three guilty."

Wilbur sighed heavily, but more like someone tired of someone else's stubbornness than aware of his own wrongdoing.

"We just want you to be more careful," he said calmly, using the exact tone Phil knew perfectly well because he had taught him himself. The older his children were, the more clearly he saw that they were slowly turning all his words against him. "Old people die easily."

Phil rolled his eyes. His sons' concern could be really touching, but at times they could really get on his nerves.

"You won't get rid of me so soon," he cut the subject short, twirling the crown on his finger. "Where's Fundy?"

Wilbur, with all his ass stubbornness, could sense when he should give up.

"Kitchen. He's trying to sneak some cake."

As it turned out in a moment, the attempt turned out to be quite successful. Though Phil suspected Tommy had more to do with it, because the cake looked perfectly normal at first glance. It took a moment to notice that someone had cut a thick strip from the center, gluing the other halves together, thus removing all of the "n" from the frosted "Fundy". Not that anyone would mind.

The birthday boy looked quite pleased, if a bit out of breath, but no one expected anything else, since he and Charlie thought it was the pinnacle of entertainment to roll around on furniture and hide under the table. Quackity, theoretically working as their support, in practice mostly bantering Wilbur, occasionally shouted something to his son in Spanish, but looking at the results, it might as well be encouraging him not to take prisoners and smash the house to dust. Phil was only glad that he had refrained from replacing the carpet, because a second piece of cake had just landed on it.

In fact, no one was entirely sure where Charlie came from. Bad just called one day saying that Sapnap, assisted by both of his fiancées, had just brought an infant home so that, as he put it, "They might get to know their grandson." At this point in the conversation, Phil had to hang up because he was laughing a little too much, but as he later learned, neither of the boys wanted to say who the baby's mother was, and when asked which of them exactly he is his father, they would reply with the collective "Me!". Charlie was two weeks old at the time and, as Skeppy found, he was not on any missing persons register. His picture did not appear in the news or on the milk carton, so after many attempts to calmly talk and a few less calm 'family interventions', there was nothing left but to come to terms with the fact that the baby exists. Regardless of where it came from or whose genes he had.

Deep down, Bad probably hoped that at least this last mystery would be solved when the boy was a bit older, but Charlie was now four years old, had an eternal runny nose, and looked like absolutely no one. He was really cute and always polite (surely Karl's influence), even though he would sometimes switch from English to Spanish for no good reason, and you couldn't "put him" back until he wanted to. On the other hand, Fundy had just gotten out of a very long phase of telling everyone that he was a dog (which Tommy had absolutely nothing to do with), so Phil really wasn't going to judge anyone.

"I told you it would be better to take them to the park," said Wilbur, very boldly for someone who had gone to the pool with Fundy and Tommy two months earlier and returned without his brother and with a hysterical child, very unhappy because he was too young to climb the biggest slide. Tommy came home by bus, even more grumpy if possible, and continued to rebuke on every occasion that he had been forgotten and cruelly abandoned.

"In fact, I hadn't forgotten him at all," Wilbur confessed some time later. "I just didn't want it to be even louder."

If Phil believed that exposing his youngest son to the terrace this time would also reduce the murderous decibel levels in the living room, he would have done so without hesitation.

"Someone is ringing the doorbell!" Tommy called, barely shouting over the squeals of two very excited boys and the song coming from the TV that had already been etched in everyone's memory for good.

"So open the door," Phil shouted, but he pushed himself off the couch, knowing in advance that if something was going to be done, he had to do it himself.

As predicted, Tommy, carrying a pile of blankets and pillows, only looked at him meaningfully.

"I'm busy," he informed, diving under the table to join the building of the 'base' in a very mature way.

Phil already felt that he would be missing him when he finally left for college. The house will be much too quiet and peaceful again...

He was expecting a pizza delivery man, so he instinctively opened the door to grab the boxes, but he froze in surprise. The woman standing on the threshold held nothing in her hands. She was also not wearing a supplier's outfit, unless they made a huge leap in dress code. Instead, she wore a long navy blue dress, dark hair in a neat bun, and was smiling as radiantly as anyone in the middle of a work would do.

"Hello," she said cheerfully.

Phil nodded automatically, unable to take his eyes off her.

"Oh, yeah. Hello."

They were both silent for a few seconds, each clearly expecting some continuation.

"I'm Kristin."

Phil nodded once more.

"Hello," he repeated, not sure what else to say.

The silence began to become somewhat uncomfortable. The woman's smile faded slightly.

"I'm Fundy's teacher."

Phil was awake just enough at the last moment not to greet her a third time.

"Oh. Oooh!" Now that he took a closer look at her, he could actually see her in a class photo and hear her name once or twice... times a day.

Fundy, like Tommy before him, had lost all enthusiasm for education after the first few weeks of excitement, and there was no sign that he would grow up to be a little genius hungry for books and facts. But he was still surprisingly easy to get out of bed in the morning, and on his return he always had at least one story related to his teacher, which he had to share with everyone at dinner, trying to speak and eat at the same time.

So Kristin was known and widely adored in their home. Phil had never had a chance to meet her in person before, but he had deep respect for anyone who could make Fundy sit still for more than a minute.

Regarding Fundy, he appeared next to him, bumping into Phil with such force that he grabbed the doorframe at the last moment.

"Who came?" He panted, on the one hand hiding behind his grandfather, on the other, peering from behind his legs with curiosity. He immediately forgot all his shyness as soon as he saw Kristin. "You came!" He rejoiced, running out to her and falling straight into her open arms.

She laughed and picked him up, propping him on her hip.

"I promised, right?" She tapped his nose with her finger, and Fundy, if at all possible, beamed even more.

Phil had never been able to refuse that smile, but this time he was a bit too confused to just accept everything and not ask questions.

"I have a strange feeling that I don't know something," he assessed, looking at his grandson from under raised eyebrows. He immediately hugged Kristin's neck tighter, hiding his face in her arm. "Fundy." The boy huddled against the woman as if he were expecting her dress to absorb him all. "Fundy, I can see you."

Kristin frowned.

"Fundy, you didn't say at home you invited me," she asked gently, and that made the boy look up a little.

"Well, because Tommy said," he began, taking a deep breath and clearly trying to sound very serious, 'like a little businessman', as Techno put it, "that if I say they won't let me."

He might as well be limited to his uncle's name alone, or he could just point his finger at him. If Phil got a pound for every sentence starting with this, he would now be sailing a private yacht in a private ocean. Instead, he only had more gray hair and frayed nerves.

"You invited your teacher?" he assured, on the one hand angry, on the other hand happy that this time it ended only there. These two could have had much worse ideas together.

Fundy waved his legs as a sign that he wanted to hit the ground back.

"And Tommy said," he recited, rocking on his heels. At times like this, he was most like his father, in his worst, most gremlinic condition "that it was my birthday and I can invite whoever I want." He lifted his chin proudly, but quickly realized that no one was impressed and his confidence faded into the ether. "He said so," he added more softly, more defensively.

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"But not without telling us, Fundy. You should ask first."

"And Tommy-"

"Fundy," he said firmly, a little sharper than planned. The boy curled his shoulders, his head lowered sadly. "You know you can't always listen to Tommy. We've talked about this hundreds of times before."

Fundy looked at him with large, already teary eyes, made his saddest, most heart-stopping expression, and before anyone could stop him he had already sneaked past him back into the house, presumably to find someone who would be willing to defend him. It was hard to judge to what extent he was just a very sensitive child, and to what extent he had seen that a similar tactic worked phenomenally in their home and always produced the best results. Anyway, he was even more dramatic than Wilbur, that's already a high level.

Kristin watched him go, but she was probably used to his acting as well, because she didn't look very moved. At most a bit saddened and very embarrassed.

"I can go if it's a problem," she assured her, but Phil shook his head immediately, already taking a step back to clear her way through the door.

"No, no, it's okay," he said quickly. "I can see he really wants you here. It's just..." He sighed heavily. "Let's just say he listens to his uncle a little too much."

Kristin laughed, clearly relieved.

"I know. I hear a lot about what 'Tommy said'," she assured, and something in her eyes, some mischievous gleam, made Phil believe that most of these things had painted their house as quite... unusual place. "You must be Phil." She extended her hand to him, and he squeezed it immediately. "Fundy talks a lot about you too."

That was what Phil feared the most.

"Good things, I hope," he joked, not desperately at all.

Kristin smirked as she put a finger to her lips.

"Maybe I'll keep the details to myself."

Phil's face dropped.

"Now I need to know."

The woman laughed, and before he could make her realize that no, he wasn't joking, he really must know, he heard a loud grunt behind his back. He turned and was not surprised to see that Fundy had already found a bodyguard and that he looked very pleased with that fact.

Techno glanced at their unannounced visitor, raised his eyebrows briefly, but then, urged on by a tug on his shirt, focused on his very responsible role of a knight stroking the evil dragon.

"He says you're mean." He said with palpable resentment. Fundy leaned in his arms to whisper something in his ear. Techno nodded. "Ah. And you yelled."

If Phil hadn't known that his son was really taking his assignment quite seriously, he might even have been amused. But a few too many times he had to argue that, yes, he had the right to forbid his grandchild from watching TV in his own home 'just because' he still had not done his homework, even though he was asked to do so five times. Fundy knew perfectly well that just as Tommy was the source of all brilliant ideas, Techno was always ready to stand on his head to get him out of trouble afterwards.

Phil crossed his arms over his chest, trying to look down at his son, even if he was short a few inches.

"Nobody has ever yelled at that child, and it shows," he snorted and pointed to Kristin as evidence in the case. "He invited his teacher."

Techno, although surprised, did not even flinch.

"Oh. That's nice," he said with overpowering calm, and nodded to the woman. "But what, he did it alone?"

"With Tommy."

"Oh, that makes more sense. I don't understand why you blame Fundy." He tossed the kid in his arms, holding him in a defensive gesture. "It was definitely the gremlin's idea."

Phil had a lot of comments about this distribution of guilt, but he bit his tongue. No matter what he said, Tommy was going to get a whack in the head from his brother as soon as he emerged from under the table, why bother and waste oxygen at all?

Instead, he gave his far-over-smug grandson one more scolding glance and invited Kristin to the table, warning at the last minute that someone might be hiding under it. It didn't do much, because a moment later Charlie almost wiped his snotty nose on her dress anyway, but if she felt offended by it, she kept it to herself. Soon after, Wilbur caught up with her, as he was always eager for all praise of his child, and Fundy himself climbed onto her lap, occasionally interfering with his comments on the story in places where he was sure that "No, it wasn't like that!". Techno and Quackity stayed a bit aside, the former to deepen his antisociality, the

latter busy talking on the phone. He had to cancel some supposedly important meeting to be here at all, but Charlie was afraid to be left alone without a family member, and Karl and Sapnap had their own errands to take care of. And they won in the rock paper scissors. Bad was usually the natural choice for a nanny in these situations, but he wasn't in town at the time, and Skeppy...

Phil liked Skeppy. Or rather, he had no sensible reason not to like him, and he tried to be straightforward and clear about it. The thing is, Skeppy wasn't stupid and he could see perfectly well that he hadn't been a favorite guest in their house for some time now and the atmosphere was a bit cooler as soon as he stepped over the threshold. Everyone knew it was stupid and irrational, but somehow no one could bring himself to stop. Not when they agreed that they had been brazenly robbed of something fucking important.

When Fundy was little, he couldn't learn to speak for a long time. He was a year and a half before his babbling started to resemble single syllables, and even then he had no intention of putting them together. Wilbur kept saying that each child develops at its own pace, and if his son doesn't speak, it means he simply has nothing to say to them. Everyone nodded in agreement, and then everyone went back to worrying in silence and in private. So when the child's chatter finally started to sound a little more like words, they might have reacted a bit too enthusiastically. Wilbur practically started talking about himself only in the third person, wanting the word 'dad' to be the first to come. Techno was making fun of him incessantly, but Phil had caught him repeatedly whispering his name, hunched over a crib. Tommy was slightly more original and a lot more himself, which ended up in a row because for some reason Wilbur didn't want his child's first word to be 'fuck'. Phil himself was absolutely in addition, he just wanted his grandson to be healthy and he would not condemn himself to such stupid 'competition'. It just happened that his name was the shortest and it would make the most sense if they had focused on him, but that's just a suggestion, of course, he doesn't force anyone to do anything...

The fun ended in a particularly disappointing manner one afternoon when Skeppy dropped by to return the drill he had borrowed a few days earlier. At the mere sight of him, Fundy turned in Techno's arms, grinned broadly and, holding out his arms towards him, shouted: "Skeppy!" as smooth and clear as if he had been practicing it secretly for months.

Phil, of course, wasn't angry about it at all. He was an adult, he didn't take offense at such nonsense. He just thought that some people were really preying on someone else's goodness and tricked their entire hand when offered a finger, that's all. But he absolutely wasn't angry and he didn't have a grudge!

So Quackity was chosen and he was trying hard to pretend that he shouldn't be in his casino right now, watching over some important and perfectly legal business. He kept an eye on Charlie all the time, but it was completely unnecessary, because since Kristin had entered the living room, both boys had only seen her and only wanted to play with her. If Phil hadn't been so impressed with her patience, he might even have felt jealous.

"I'm so sorry," he said remorsefully, bringing her tea, taking the opportunity the children had run to put on their shoes, and there was a chance she might be able to drink it in peace. "Wilbur is going to take them to the garden, there will be a moment of silence."

She shook her head, but seemed relieved.

"That's okay. I knew what I was signing up for," she assured. Phil considered warning that the family was never entirely predictable, but decided he preferred her to be positive about them. Still. "They're really cute."

"Sometimes, yes. And Fundy really likes you."

She smiled broadly. Fundy, running past the table, waved to her, and she replied immediately.

"I like him very much, too," she said so honestly that Phil felt a surge of warmth somewhere near his heart. And then she looked at him with the same twinkle in her eyes as before, and he immediately felt like a deer hunting.

"What?"

She tilted her head, studying him closely.

"Can I be honest with you?" She asked, which, as is well known, wasn't really a question, rather an announcement of a bomb drop. "I have the impression that he's going to try to get us together."

As expected - the bomb exploded.

Phil blinked in confusion before surprise was replaced by a familiar resignation.

"Fundy?" he made sure, not even having the strength to be embarrassed. He had raised three boys alone, and the ideas of the fourth one really didn't impress him anymore.

"More like Tommy. But Fundy hardly refuses him."

"What did they do?"

Kristin pursed her lips, visibly holding back a laugh. It was going to be great.

"Let's say they really wanted me to come. They say you need company." She looked at him, eyebrow raised slightly. "Because you are, here is the quote 'very old and very rich and may die soon'."

Behind them, Techno snorted loudly and Phil instinctively turned to glare at him, with absolutely no effect.

"I'm not old!" He said indignantly, feeling his cheeks start to burn.

This time, Kristin laughed completely openly.

"But you're rich, right?" She asked innocently, but immediately put her hand on his shoulder soothingly. "Relax. Children can have worse ideas."

Phil grimaced in pain.

"I assure you I know," he grunted, but didn't have time to add anything else, because Techno suddenly pushed his chair on the other side of the table and leaned over the counter toward Kristin.

"Do you have children?" He asked very seriously, without even a hint of merriment.

It didn't make a big impression on Kristin.

"My own? No."

Techno narrowed his eyes.

"Do you want to have any?"

Phil wanted to slap him over the head.

"Techno!" He was indignant, because he could understand that Tommy still had stupid ideas, but he expected slightly more from his oldest child.

"What?" The boy just shrugged, completely ignoring his gaze. "I'm just making sure. So that there would be no surprises later."

He opened his mouth to somehow comment on it, but finally closed it and just sighed heavily.

"Just don't listen to anything he says," he asked, while Kristin looked like she hadn't had a better time in a long time. "None of them." He thought for a moment. "But most of all Tommy."

* * *

The guests dispersed hours later, leaving traditionally a huge mess. Kristin had offered to help with the cleaning, but Phil felt bad enough already that the boys had stuck to her for most of the evening and wouldn't even give her a cup of tea.

"I really didn't mind," she said once more as he walked her to the door.

And then, as if nothing had happened, she slipped a piece of napkin with a phone number scribbled into his hand, smiled, and by the time he shook off his shock, she was at the gate in the garden. Phil was sure he would have heard a few comments about it if Techno hadn't been busy driving Tommy to work and Wilbur hadn't been carrying Fundy up the stairs. The latter had fallen asleep on the couch before everyone else had left for good, and no one had the heart to wake him up just to get him to bed anyway.

Phil lovingly watched Wilbur carefully wrapping the covers around Fundy, making sure to place the teddy fox next to him.

"He's too much like you," he said, more than happy that this time it wasn't he who had to burden his spine by carrying the baby up the stairs. He had carried way too much in his life. "He even grumbles just as much as you did at his age. Actually, you never grew out of it."

Strangely enough, Wilbur neither looked offended nor tried to protest that he had always been a prodigy child who had absolutely never been in a bad mood. Instead, he sat up in bed and stared at his sleeping son for a moment with a strange, unreadable expression on his face.

"Do you really think he looks like me?" He asked finally, carefully brushing the boy's hair back from his forehead.

When they were so close, it was hard not to notice that they weren't very similar physically. In fact, Phil had tried several times before to find at least one thing in common, the same shape of the ears, the same noses, the way they smiled, but sooner or later he always accepted the idea that Fundy had apparently been genetically drawn more from Sally than from his father. Techno joked sometimes that it was better for a child. Wilbur himself didn't seem to care at all, and had never brought it up before.

Phil hesitated, but finally closed the door, muffling voices from below. In the pale light of the bedside lamp, Wilbur looked even more gloomy than before.

"Quackity said recently," he began as soon as Phil sat down next to him on the bed, taking care not to move too abruptly and wake the baby, "it's funny that Tommy looks so like you, even though you are not related, while Fundy is nothing like me. Somehow I can't stop thinking about it. I mean, I thought about it before, but now..." He sighed, once again gently stroking the sleeping boy's hair. Thick, reddish and definitely not inherited from him. "Now even more. I knew Sally..." He paused for a moment, finally withdrawing his hand and turning to face his father. "She wasn't quite faithful to me. But I never asked. Even when she said that she was pregnant, and it did not quite agree with the dates, it still... I guess I just deluded that maybe it was right. Maybe I'm just making excuses that it's not my fault."

Phil nodded slowly. He would be lying to say that he never considered such an option. That he had never looked at his grandson with the thought that another deception would suit Sally after she left Wilbur alone with the baby and has hardly given any sign of life since then. He wasn't sure how he felt about this thought. On the one hand, if he were honest, it wouldn't make much difference to him. Fundy was theirs, he was a member of their family, no matter whose genes he had. In fact, he might even fit them even more if they had nothing biological in common. In the name of tradition. On the other hand, he felt bad about this indifference. It was Wilbur's feelings that should be central to this, and he had every right to feel cheated and hurt. He had a right to be annoyed that he was raising a child that wasn't his own.

Even if Phil would be very disappointed in that attitude.

He looked once more at Fundy, who had just rolled over, nestling his face in a teddy fox.

"You want to know for sure?"

Wilbur hesitated, stared at his own hands for a moment, but when he finally shook his head, there was a lot of firmness to it.

"No, I don't. Maybe it's a little weird, but I don't think it matters," he judged, and Phil felt the invisible weight drop from his heart. "He's mine. I don't care about the rest." He shrugged, but when he looked back at his father he seemed a little less confident. "You... would you mind? If he weren't your grandson so... biologically?"

Under other circumstances, Phil might have felt a little offended by such suspicion. For the time being, however, he decided to sacrifice his own pride for the sake of a higher cause.

"You know I never bothered with such details."

He spread his arms, and Wilbur immediately hugged him tightly.

"I know," he admitted, and there was a smile in his voice. "I probably got it from you."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand that's it. The end. My gods, 400k + words, a year and a half of my life... I regret nothing.

I had a great time writing this story and I hope you found it at least half as fun to read. It feels strange to think that this is the end, but it's sooo good to be free at last. I'm going to savor these few days of relief before I feel like starting "something short" again and get stuck, lmao. Anyway, you guys are great, thanks for reading and commenting, and see you soon!

End Notes

The longer I work on this story, the less I like it. But you know what?

Fuck it!

I can deeply care about my fic even if it's not perfect and never will be. This is how we learn and develop, and that's what I'm going to do!

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